

A MEMO PREPARED BY
SUHSD ACTION RESEARCH TEAM



UNCOVERING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Insights from Sequoia Union High
School District

MAY 2023

memo

To: Sequoia Union High School District Leadership, Board of Education Directors, & Interested Parties
From: SUHSD Youth Action Research Team
Re: Uncovering the Student Experience: Insights from Sequoia Union High School District
Date: May 2023

In the winter of 2023, as part of the Stanford Redwood City Sequoia School Mental Health Collaborative, Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD) engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) to support us in an Action Research project to engage student voice as part of their work. We each attend (or recently graduated from) Carlmont High School, Menlo-Atherton High School, Redwood High School, or Woodside High School. All of us hope that our work will benefit our community.

We developed a set of research questions that addressed SUHSD's interests in students' sense of belonging and emotion regulation, so that the district could draw upon our findings as they develop programming to better serve SUHSD students. To the District's questions we added others that addressed aspects of the student experience we were interested in better understanding: students' perspectives of what makes high school courses engaging and the impact of middle school experience on high school experience. We then created an interview protocol and conducted 43 interviews with other SUHSD high school students and with each other, from March 2 through April 1, 2023. From these interviews we identified, coded, and analyzed the main points to create a set of findings. Our research questions and findings are outlined below, along with our recommendations.

INTERVIEW POOL DEMOGRAPHICS

To encourage participation in the interview process by high school students across the district, SUHSD shared the opportunity with teachers and staff at each district high school. While some students signed up for interviews in response to this outreach, the response rate did not match our interview goals, so we supplemented those interviews by reaching out to peers to participate in the interview process. The only criterion was that the participants were currently enrolled at a high school in SUHSD. We interviewed 19 students from Carlmont; 12 from Menlo-Atherton; 5 from Redwood; 1 from TIDE Academy; and 6 from Woodside.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS

We identified four research questions:

1. What contributes to students' sense of belonging at their high school?
2. What contributes to students' ability to regulate their emotions during school?
3. In what ways can SUHSD instruction be more accessible and engaging to students?
4. To what extent did students' middle school experience prepare them for high school?

We developed interview questions that would help to answer these questions, which were grouped into categories.

While we gathered and coded interview data as a full group, we worked in teams to develop findings for each category in each research question. The following sections reflect our teams' interpretation of the findings, with input

from the full group along with our Gardner Center facilitators and guests who shared their reflections throughout the findings development process.

1. What contributes to students' sense of belonging at their high school?

Findings by David Diaz and Ellen Forte

People who contribute to sense of belonging

Out of 43 students who were interviewed, almost three quarters said that the people who helped them feel a sense of belonging, most often friends and teachers, provided a safe and non judgmental space. When asked what belonging felt like to them, interviewees most frequently used the words, "comfortable," "supported," "seen," and "heard." Most of the interviewees expressed that the people who made them feel like they belong did so by creating a community, whether that would be in social or academic settings. Several students also highlighted that they felt like they were a valued member of a group, whether as a teammate, a band member, a student or a friend. Finding others who share parts of their identity creates reassurance that there are others like them, others who understand their experiences living in this world. They are then able to build communities that reflect those shared aspects of identity. In some cases, this was fostered through activities that facilitate community-building, such as collaboration on group projects, while in others, it was demonstrated through simply listening and providing a space for students to vent or otherwise express their feelings.

One of the interviewees mentioned how being a part of the swim team since freshman year has helped them feel like they belong, because the team has built a tight-knit community over time. He also mentioned how elective courses, like journalism and AP Art, have further built a community, since there's not much academic competition in those courses, and they encourage more collaboration and bonding. There's a lack of academic pressure, which allows this environment to flourish.

Likewise, over half of the 43 students interviewed mentioned that those who make them feel like they belong believe that they help through connections on the personal level. Students cite active listening, relatability, being treated like an adult, having an understanding attitude when it comes to one's personal life, and humor to deal with situations as traits that help make them feel like they belong. Students also mentioned how, when individuals are genuine, it's easier to connect with them on a personal level. For instance, many students appreciated when teachers or friends demonstrated an open attitude and environment because it fosters a more personal relationship.. One student shared that simply being greeted in the halls by their algebra teacher helped to make them more comfortable in their class.

Some students described their sense of belonging in relation to the community created in the classroom. For example, when it comes to academics, one of the interviewees mentioned how their math teacher has fostered an environment, by allowing them to ask for help on topics even outside of math.

Challenges to feeling sense of belonging

The most frequently identified challenge to feeling a sense of belonging at school involved peers not being welcoming or kind (17 of 43 interviewees). Some students mentioned how finding people who share similar interests or backgrounds can be challenging, and often can block a sense of belonging by preventing people from finding like-minded individuals. Primarily, interviewees cited how many students already had pre-established friend groups, which made approaching them seem more scary and difficult. Also a frequent response, many students mentioned how they felt unwelcome or ostracized based on their race and ethnicity, primarily in the classroom and more broadly as part of school culture. Many feel like they don't have enough peers of similar cultures or backgrounds to connect to, and a specific student mentioned how their school was dominated by "white culture". For example, one student

mentioned how they felt like “the odd one out”, since they were the only Latino in their Advanced English class, and another cited how the culture in the school is predominantly “white”, which makes it hard to relate to other people.

An example of a student being ostracized based on their race was when they first joined an AP class. As the class went on they realized how they were a minority in that class, and didn't see much representation in other classmates. This ended up leading to them not feeling like they belonged in the classroom environment, having a negative impact on their mental health, and as a result they dropped out of the course.

Another one of the biggest challenges to feeling a sense of belonging was feeling judged, either by their classmates or their teachers. Several students expressed that not knowing what the social expectations were when it came to clothes, speech, and actions made it difficult for them to feel like they were a valued part of their school community. Other students mentioned the fear of sharing the ‘wrong’ idea or concept as a roadblock to feeling like they belonged.

One interviewee explained an instance in which their class was discussing a book involving queer characters, and their classmates were denying that those characters had a queer relationship, which made the student feel like, as a queer person, their identity was being heavily judged.

Some students also cited how the fear of putting oneself into new or unfamiliar situations acted as a detriment to their sense of belonging, because they couldn't connect fully with their peers (11 of 43 interviewees). Multiple interviewees expressed that creating friendships at the beginning of high school was extremely difficult, because they didn't know anyone and lacked the familiarity that they had had in middle school. Similarly, other students talked about the pressure to not offend anyone, explaining that that fear prevented them from talking to other students, because they were afraid something they said might be misinterpreted or taken out of context.

For instance, a particular student mentioned how it can be hard to find the courage to go up and talk to somebody, due to the uncertainty of what may happen as a result. This makes it a lot harder for students to connect with others who may potentially have things in common with them.

Similarly, some students discussed how a lack of trust in others, alongside the fear of academic judgment, were challenges to having a sense of belonging. For instance, one student talked about being unsure about their writing capabilities, and another felt pressured by their classmates' accomplishments and in comparison, didn't feel worthy of being in the same class as them. Another one explained how they don't feel comfortable talking, for fear of their peers judging them. Also, for some students, it can be hard to trust new people, and some even mentioned being called out by the teacher, which further contributes to this unwelcoming environment.

In addition, something thought provoking that a student mentioned was how students at their school overall are closed when it comes to their emotions, which in turn creates a “hostile environment”, uncondusive to a sense of belonging.

School programs and policies that support sense of belonging

When asked about school programs which contribute to a sense of belonging, many students mentioned how school programs (prominently, AVID, ASB, CHAMP), helped to support a sense of belonging by connecting people together, through a variety of ways. For instance, students mentioned how programs like Freshman Transition and CHAMP helped incoming students feel welcome, by building connections between the upper and lower classmen and introducing them to new friends. Some students mentioned how SOS achieved a similar feat, by connecting students

to a community of people who are aware of mental health and are going through similar situations. Finally, interviewees cited how school programs like ASB make sure that no student is left out through schoolwide events and small acts of kindness, like writing valentines for every student, which help to connect students to the school community.

Some students also mentioned how being surrounded by like-minded individuals or people with similar aspirations can support a sense of belonging. For example, many students mentioned examples of clubs or programs where they were surrounded by people with the same dreams, goals, or backgrounds as them, like Key Club and their focus on community service, ASB and their shared goal of making fun events for the school, as well as AVID and students' shared dream of going to college. For many students, these types of programs create a family for them, and makes them feel like a part of a community of people who are striving for the same goals, and who come from the same type of background. Some also mentioned how being around like-minded people makes it easier to make friends and personal connections. An example of this comes from a student who joined GSA (Gender Sexuality Alliance), and was able to find people who were very similar to him.

Some students cited as well how school programs help with a sense of belonging by providing a safe, understanding, and non-judgemental space. For instance, for a lot of identity groups like LGBTQ+ students and cultural groups, programs like GSA and Latino Club create a safe space for them to express themselves. Also, a lot of the students appreciated how welcoming and easily accessible these environments were, like inclusive clubs (GSA and Drama Club), as well as the dress code, which was flexible and allowed students to express themselves freely.

Some other factors that students noted included educating freshmen on important topics to open their minds to compassion and patience (SOS), and recognizing that learning is different for some students and allowing kids to make mistakes with teacher compassion (AVID).

Policies and personal values

To understand how school policies might influence a student's sense of belonging, interviewees were asked about policies and programs that did or did not reflect their values. The most frequently cited policy was their school's dress codes. Some students felt their dress codes were too restrictive and that girls were being targeted more than boys, while others felt it was relatively fair. One interviewee expressed concern over the dress code limiting students' freedom of expression, and explained how one of their friends was "dress coded" for what the interviewee felt was an unfair reason.

Some interviewees simply didn't have a lot of knowledge surrounding school policies, and focused on programs instead. Many expressed that some programs, such as AVID, require additional steps that many students aren't aware of or taught how to do. Others explained that they wanted more direct information from their school on the various programs that were available for students, particularly those in underrepresented groups. One student cited the lack of information surrounding the FAFSA, explaining that while they are confident it's helpful, their school didn't provide guidance on what it was or why it was needed.

Other interviewees expressed their discontent that school policies were not enforced consistently throughout the school year. Several students explained that school policies are more strictly enforced towards the beginning of the year, but those same policies tend to loosen up as the year goes on, creating an inconsistent environment surrounding school rules, which can be confusing for many students to navigate, specifically when it comes to policies surrounding attendance, late work, and academic integrity.

2. What contributes to students' ability to regulate their emotions during school?

Findings by Elizabeth Kao and David Meraz

Biggest influences on emotions at school

Nearly half of students interviewed shared that the largest influences on their emotions were related to home and family life. Stressful situations such as parents' divorce or an ill family member negatively impacted emotional regulating ability at school. Notably, several students also expressed stress coming from family or cultural expectations at home including high academic performance and emotional control. About a third of students interviewed identified several academic pressures that influenced their emotions. These included an accumulation of workload from classes, feeling defined by grades and test scores, and additional deadlines such as college, scholarship, and internship applications. Most students who identified academics wielding the strongest influence over their moods emphasized that any class schedule changes/shifts exacerbated states of distress.

Just under a third of students were most strongly influenced by friends. Among those students, all of them expressed that friends shape them positively and are extremely supportive. Teenagers are highly influenced by the people around them. This was reflected greatly as many interviewees found solace by speaking with friends that are supportive and understanding of their situations because many students share the same experiences that adults may find hard to identify with.

How students usually express emotions at school

Twenty-nine of the 43 students interviewed shared that they turn to coping strategies to clear their minds using a variety of different approaches. Many students chose to remove themselves from stressful situations or distract themselves by completing different activities, citing tools such as listening to music or removing themselves from the situation when dealing with emotions at school. Coming close in second, 28 of the 43 students interviewed, expressed that they found consolation by talking with friends.

Although many students felt a strong sense of familiarity and trust in opening to friends, a few talked to adults as well. Some students preferred seeking support from trusted teachers. While some teachers are viewed as reliable and supportive, not all students shared this view. For instance, one student expressed that they would only seek out a teacher if they felt they had no other options and another shared that favoritism in the classroom made it hard to want to build connections with certain teachers.

The main effect of students' coping methods was that students were able to freely express their emotions without judgment. Passive methods (such as art) and direct methods (such as confiding in others) were both successful. Another main effect of students' coping methods in dealing with emotions at school is a sense of comfort or distraction from the original situation. Overall, confiding in trusted friends and/or adults helped students approach problems level headedly with new insight and support.

Challenges and suggestions for regulating emotions at school

Thirty-four of the 43 interviewed students, or about three-quarters, shared that they experienced challenges related to regulating their emotions at school. Among those students, the most common type of challenge related to the potential impact of expressing emotions on their relationships at school. Most of these students expressed concern or fear of being judged by others, with a few specifically mentioning perceptions of stigma around the need for mental health support. Some explained that they felt an expectation to not show emotion or vulnerability at school.

Academics and school came in a very close second place to social factors. In terms of stress from academic structure or classes, students felt immense, overwhelming pressure from excessive workloads accumulated from many courses. Every senior we interviewed felt that college applications exacerbated the pressure and anxiety. For instance, students felt that they lacked sufficient time to devote to writing essays for college applications that will determine the next few years of life. Moreover, several students noted that grades being released during school hours added to mental stress from pressure of academic competition within classroom environments. While students overwhelmingly expressed that they would appreciate teachers understanding the competing pressures students faced from other courses and responsibilities outside of school, one student shared that although she experienced stress and anxiety, it was her decision to take challenging courses making it her responsibility to commit to the coursework and other items she had to complete.

Other challenges students identified were the inconsistent structure of scheduling/agendas, and instructors' indifference to life beyond their classroom. One suggestion was to provide more opportunities for communication between teachers and students.

A few interviewees explained that on the first day of school, a specific teacher spoke to students about how he/she would not respond to any emails or questions beyond school hours as it was "his/her own time." Hearing this, many students felt it unfair that they would not be able to ask questions or clarifications right after the last bell of the school day. Students were distressed because they did not want to disturb teachers' private time, but also needed help on certain assignments or projects throughout the year.

In some interviews, students spoke about barriers to accessing mental health services, including mental health counselors and counseling programs. Some students also feel that their confidentiality had been broken to an extent because they have to inform and request permission from the teachers in order to use these resources. For example, a recently changed policy relating to accessing services means that students must tell their teacher first to take advantage of wellness resources during class time. But, those who mentioned this issue feel that teachers and schools need to realize that students who are using these programs a lot need a break and often have underlying issues. They wished to see teachers focusing on understanding those issues and supporting students.

Interviewees most often suggested that there should be more availability of these resources; also noting that the lack of counselors speaking Spanish resulted in them not accessing the service. While some spoke of positive experiences with counselors, one student said that counselors do not always seem to be listening, nor do they always follow up.

Many noted that there is stigma surrounding mental health issues, and while some programs help address this, more could be done.

Some interviewees also perceived that some teachers are not so approachable. If they were, interviewees said that it would make many more students open up and let out their emotions instead of bottling them up. This is because some would feel better talking to a teacher about how they feel rather than going straight to a therapist, which sometimes makes a student feel awkward. One student mentioned how there are few teachers like that and they believe that if teachers were more approachable the students would open up to them.

3. In what ways can SUHSD instruction be more accessible and engaging to students?

Findings by Vianca Lopez Molina and Cecilia Lopez-Sandoval

Things that make classes captivating

The majority of students mentioned that interactive activities, such as student-led discussions and collaborative, hands-on projects, fostered a more captivating environment within the class. As one student mentioned, her science

class seems to be more interesting because it includes labs and more hands-on learning while her math class is less interactive and is more lecture-based and relies on memorization. This student expressed that having hands-on learning was beneficial to her education as it was instructive while allowing her to be engaged with the subject.

Eighteen students mentioned how the course content made learning fun. The majority of these students stated that being genuinely interested in the subject made them look forward to learning in class. A student expressed that their computer science class held her attention as she already had a desire to learn more about the subject. She also explained how the material can be translated into her future career, motivating her to get a head start. Many others expressed similar thoughts about being motivated and eager to learn in courses where they could apply what they were learning into the real world. Students feel more engagement in subjects that personally interest them and can further them on their future career paths.

Seventeen participants stated that the teachers themselves made class captivating. The teacher's passion, use of personal anecdotes, welcoming nature, and overall charisma allowed the students to feel more connected to the class, making it captivating. Many students expressed that the teacher's energy is matched by the class's energy and effort. One student shared their experience in government class as being defined by a teacher who was dedicated and engaging towards the subject and that she fostered many in-depth class conversations. The teacher's attitude created an informative classroom while creating comfort for students to be motivated to learn. Another student expressed how his experience in history class seemed to be less engaging as the teacher didn't seem to put his full effort into creating the lectures and assignments, making the student and his peers put in less effort. Students explained the significance of the teacher's charisma and energy in forming the classroom's overall wellbeing. The teachers act as a main source that enlivens the student's attitude and energy towards the subject.

Things that make classes boring

Thirty-two students, nearly three-quarters of those interviewed, mentioned that the teacher's teaching style is what determines if a class is boring. The majority of students highlighted how lack of collaboration between the students, or lecture-based classes, shortened their attention span and made it difficult to pay attention. A student shared her experience in chemistry class, explaining it was hard to engage with the material as it was heavily based on the teacher's lectures on the subject and it didn't include many interactive activities, such as labs or class discussions. The student's attention was easily lost, which led the student to not comprehend the subject as well. Without a strong understanding of chemistry, the amount of classwork and homework the teacher would assign would be difficult to be completed. Interviewees described having a less engaging class, such as being heavily lecture-based and less interaction, as contributing to less understanding of the material. And they described a balance between teacher lecturing and student interactive activities as benefiting the student's ability to succeed in learning the subject. Repetition of classwork and daily activities can also initiate a student to disconnect from grasping the content. A student described that it was very difficult during his freshman year to really connect with the material as it relied on the teachings of edpuzzles and online assignments. Although such assignments can advance an individual's understanding of the content, the class shouldn't only consist of these types of assignments but rather a variety of different assignments, such as teacher and student discussions or labs.

Suggested changes to make classes more captivating / less boring

Many of the suggestions for improving teaching approaches focused on the desire for more collaboration and hands-on activities. Most noted that having these activities incorporated into their class would expand their attention span and help them understand the content more, reflecting our findings above. One student suggested that an ideal class structure that would consist of 70-80% hands-on learning/engaging activities, including classroom discussions or

labs, and 30-20% should include the teacher's lecturing and notetaking. With students interacting with one another, classes seem to be more captivating while learning the material in an engaging way.

Nineteen students mentioned wanting more teacher and student interaction. As the teacher-student relationship is prominent among the factors contributing to succeeding in a class, interviewees suggested more frequent interactions through activities and class discussions. From a teacher's energy or interaction with the class, individuals grow a sense of comfort in communicating with their teacher. Students mentioned that they develop a stronger sense of comfort and captivation in a class when teachers discuss a little about their background. One student shared how they remembered how engaging their AP U.S. History teacher was during their junior year as the teacher included personal anecdotes that helped connect and create a better understanding of the material. Not only does this engage students, but it creates a sense of comfort between a student and teacher. The majority of the students also hoped to see more discussion from all of the students and giving everyone a chance to have a voice in class. Making sure there's a fair amount of engagement among all students can create a stronger classroom community.

Things that make projects or assignments difficult

Twenty-eight students stated that individual assignments and projects were more difficult. This is due to: having to memorize difficult procedures, not having proper instruction, having to present by themselves, being time-consuming, and feeling pressure to do well. Many interviewees explained how English essays were the most difficult assignments to complete as they shared they didn't have enough time or well-explained instruction. A couple of Woodside High School students mentioned a project called the "senior thesis", which consisted of gathering facts about a topic of their choice and creating an essay about it. Although the work was spaced out across the whole year, students found it to be overwhelming as it took away their focus on other tasks, such as completing college applications. A student described it to be "difficult" and "unnecessary" as the workload was already heavy, taking away effort and time from their other classes. They saw the added workload from this one assignment as contributing to many students falling behind on other class assignments.

Suggested changes to make projects or assignments less difficult

Twenty-six students wanted changes in instruction and help from the teachers. Mostly the students we spoke with wanted teachers to be more understanding and welcoming, have more explicit details in instruction, and have more communication with students. One student highlighted how having the teacher provide examples to refer to while completing her projects and assignments was beneficial to meeting the teacher's expectations and understanding how to complete the assignments and projects well. In-depth instruction or adequate guidance from the teacher can also provide clarity or reassurance that would be helpful to complete any assignments. The amount of comfort between a student and teacher can also impact the level of difficulty in an assignment or project. One student mentioned that they felt uncomfortable asking questions because the teacher seemed "to give off attitude". With this feeling, this student would rather stay silent and not have the clarity they need to understand the material than to approach the teacher.

Things missing from high school instruction

Twenty students expressed different ways that teachers or leaders can be more attentive towards student's educational needs. Educational needs include adequately supporting students when lost in material or clarifying lingering questions when it's clear that many are confused. Many interviewees explained how they failed to complete an assignment due to not being properly instructed or lacking information from teachers. One student shared how she found it difficult to do any projects or assignments without guidance or proper instruction. She also mentioned how this lack of knowledge made her feel isolated from understanding the content and like she couldn't open up to her teacher for help.

Students shared feedback on how their interaction with teachers is a key factor to what is missing in high school instruction. Encouraging students to communicate and be active in class comes from a student being willing and comfortable to participate in class. Creating a relationship with a student and being understanding of their personal life (home/ family situations, mental health struggles) can help teachers understand a student's background. Many students touched upon how they felt that teachers lacked care for their students' personal lives, which led to them not being flexible or caring when students would ask for an extension or help. A student had an experience when she expressed how she felt that a teacher didn't have sympathy when she communicated that she had been struggling to write her English essay. The student had prioritized her essay and was falling behind in her other classes, which led to her asking for an extension. When communicating with the teacher, the teacher wasn't understanding. Another student mentioned how their teacher forgot that they had an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) and didn't allow for any special accommodations. Having a lack of support for students' personal life can damage their communication with teachers and disengage them with the material.

4. To what extent did students' middle school experience prepare them for high school?

Findings by Johan Alejandres and Trinity Tyson

Impact of classmates from middle school at high school

More than half of the students said that the impact of having their middle school peers in the same high school is positive. Familiarity and comfort were mentioned in almost every response. For example, one student mentioned that even though they didn't have personal relationships with some of the people they recognized from middle school, their presence supported his transition into freshman year.

Unlike the positive findings, it seems that a smaller percentage of students found that being around former middle school classmates negatively impacted them. Some students realized that they no longer related to their middle school peers. To be specific, when behaviors such as a drug habit or a mindset change developed, these students decided to distance themselves out of fear of conflict. One student said that when they grew more antisocial, being a part of their friend group made them feel like an outcast. Reminiscing on the good times they shared also makes this student revisit uncomfortable experiences.

In comparison, for those whose middle school classmates didn't come to the same high school, an equal number of students also experienced a hard time making connections. Each had their own reasons but they shared the feeling that it was difficult to feel like they belonged in pre-established friend groups. As one interviewee described:

We can think of school as a place where many sports teams train. Learning how to play with a different team can take some time, especially if you're not very good at the sport. Not having a prior history or ways to relate to your teammates can cause a barrier that turns the game (or friendship) into any other way to pass time.

Middle school experiences: Academic

When students were asked if their middle school experience was academically helpful, a large portion of the participants said that it was. Their experiences seemed to be effective because the methods that were used in the classroom were similar to the structure of a high school class environment. In reference to multiple courses, over half of students said that because of their middle school education they were comfortable with doing coursework in advanced/regular classes, had knowledge of the future courses, and gained study habits.

Among the students who shared that their middle school experience did not academically prepare them, most of them mentioned things related to the curriculum and teaching. To sum it up, there were four main issues: (1) there weren't opportunities that would help students progress (things like seminars or a part of the school day that works with/motivates students to help them get into Honors or AP classes), (2) a lot of misinformation seemed to spread because there weren't any adults informing students about things like GPA and what credits are needed to be competitive for college, (3) teachers were spreading false expectations on how high school works, and (4) students said that looking back some teachers had a style that would leave the students to teach themselves.

An example of a false expectation would be telling the students that they won't be allowed to ask for an extension in high school because, by then, they should be able to manage their time. The unfortunate truth is that some students may overcommit themselves because they don't think they can ask for help.

The second group stated that they did not feel academically prepared because of environmental factors. One environmental factor was related to Covid-19 and how in distance learning, the same classes that helped them previously no longer had a structure that promoted growth. The last issue mentioned was that their middle schools had too many students and challenges with class management. One student recounted that due to their school being underfunded they had teachers teaching big classes and most of their class time was spent waiting for the teacher to discipline students instead of teaching.

Middle school experiences: Social and Emotional

The majority of participants said that their most helpful social emotional experiences were made with or because of their friendships. It's interesting to note that only a small number of students mentioned adults as a part of a defining social experience. It's clear that many students benefit from positive social experiences with their peers in middle school. Many noted a better sense of security and confidence because of those good experiences.

Middle school preparation wished for and impact of not having that preparation

When asked about the things they wished middle school had prepared them for, a little less than half of the students said that they wished for some type of academic preparation. Students wished that they knew of the opportunities given (like AP classes or classes focusing on certain career paths) in high school. Interviewees also wished that the curriculum would focus on teaching the important topics instead of having a filler, or they wished that the academic material matched what is expected in high school and above. An example of filler could be anything that doesn't lead to understanding the topic and is something that is added on because the teacher doesn't have something prepared. We determined that what they meant by "wishing things would match" means having things like a syllabus that lays out the expectations of the class while also displaying the tests and assignments for the year or semester and having office hours for each teacher.

A related finding is that about a quarter of interviewed students shared that they wished they had more preparation or guidelines on what they should do in relation to the college admissions process. For example, things like the importance of extracurriculars, internships, credits, and programs for those colleges.

A small percentage of students said they wished they had more preparation and attention to working habits as a way to be better prepared for classes in high school. Some of the ideas that students expressed involved time management to help them balance things in their schedule, learning how to study for different classes, techniques for how to study, and how to implement those study habits into their lives. This is a very vital part of school; without this preparation students can be impacted with feelings of being behind in classes and having a lot of disorganization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations flow from the findings and our own experiences. The triple asterisk marking (***) at the beginning of a recommendation indicates that it is one of our highest priorities for action.

Sense of Belonging

In the Classroom

Creating Community

- ***We recommend facilitating more group projects, discussions, and icebreakers, and including more SEL-based curriculum to encourage collaboration and ensure that students interact with each other.***

Some students mentioned how they often felt like they belonged more when they felt like a valued member of a group. A way to build the beginning of a relationship or allow for groups to expand is to create an environment in which they have to learn more about each other. By promoting more class engagement and connections, we can break these barriers, encourage more compassion, and also combat a major issue that prevents a sense of belonging: fear of judgment by classmates.

A SEL-based curriculum encourages connections among students and between students and their teachers, leading to an increased sense of belonging in the classroom. For example, a teacher could give students time in class to work on a small project that is focused on who the student is. This could help students relate to one another. Or on the first or second day of a new class, after a brief overview of what is to come in the year, teachers and students could start with an interactive activity such as a fun debatable discussion to combat a non-welcoming environment. Especially at the beginning of classes, students are often on guard or don't open up as easily because they do not know what the class will be like or the stiff competition makes people unwilling to share or relax. Beginning the class in this interactive manner can create better engagement with the content and between classmates, as classes are usually composed of like-minded students who are passionate about the subject matter.

- ***We recommend that at the end of each semester teachers ask students anonymously what they think of the class structure via Google forms and apply student feedback to their instruction.***

This opportunity for feedback would help support better learning. And when students see that their suggestions are being considered and used, it makes them feel heard and builds their sense of belonging.

Inclusive Curriculum

- ***We recommend that teachers and aides work to create academic environments where students feel supported. This means including a diverse curriculum and allowing students to feel represented, which then leads to students feeling an increased sense of belonging.***
- ***We recommend that classrooms implement policies or reminders to students that certain verbiage or words may hurt those who are more sensitive to certain subject matter.***

We understand that this may be difficult to enforce consistently, but we think it is important. For example, in one class, students were asked to use the word "gay" rather than "homosexual" when discussing a character in a literary work because "homosexual" could come across as overtly clinical or technical when discussing serious topics surrounding someone's life, especially if the subject of conversation is related to students personally.

Outside the Classroom

Clubs and Activities

- ***We recommend that staff and teachers advocate for and create a space within the school environment for students to explore and create new friendships. This includes creating opportunities for students to design spaces for themselves where they feel comfortable and connected.***

Awareness of Programs and Policies

- *** ***We recommend educating students on school policies, different pathways, and school programs such as CHAMP, AVID, Business/Marketing/Finance, Computer Science, Drama, or Biotech. Ensure that the school policies and opportunities are publicized more, starting from freshman year in high school, even if the pathway may not pertain to freshmen students yet.***

This recommendation is important and worth considering, as students live by these policies daily, and deserve to know about the opportunities available to them. These programs often allow people to make new friends and connections with other like-minded individuals, or those with similar goals, interests, passions, or some other aspect of their identity. This supports students' sense of belonging both academically and socially, allowing them to feel valued and respected among their classmates and peers, and feel like part of a community. This is why it is important for students to know about opportunities before it is too late to join. Some interviewees shared that they did not know much about them when asked, which can have negative effects. For example, a student mentioned how their school's computer science pathway is male-dominated and could be more inclusive and diverse if it were better publicized. By increasing awareness of these programs through more club fairs or club advertising, more people will be able to find where they belong.

Policy Enforcement

- ***We recommend that administrators and staff work together to consistently enforce school policies.***

Inconsistent rules and regulations are a source of distress for many students, which impact their ability to feel like they belong at their school because they don't know which policies are enforced at what points in the year, creating unnecessary confusion.

Regulating Emotions

In the Classroom

Role of Teachers

- ***We recommend allowing more students to use self-taught methods of regulating emotions, especially in class.***

Several students noted that they find it helpful to remove themselves from a stressful situation in order to deal with negative emotions, like stepping out of class to collect themselves. It would be beneficial for these students if teachers were more flexible and considerate of these methods. For example, having a monitored room that students can go to, no questions asked. It could be timed so it wouldn't take up too much class time.

- *** ***We recommend that teachers be strongly encouraged to have an "open door policy" during lunch time, allowing students to come talk to them or eat lunch in their classrooms 1-2 days per week.***

Teachers are the second most frequently used resource interviewees identified to help mediate their emotions during school. This recommendation would allow students and teachers to get to know each other and to build better rapport so that when students' emotions become difficult to express or they need an outlet to destress, they have a safe community or place on campus where they feel safe.

- **We recommend giving students a syllabus that includes frequently asked questions and a list of academic resources that the student can use.**

This would be useful because it is very reassuring to have all the basic information – including course flow, assignments, and expectations – in writing so students don't have to ask the same questions repeatedly or guess.

- **We recommend that all teachers offer some form of online work so that students who were absent can come back better prepared.**

There could be a "soft copy" of detailed agenda uploaded online that highlights class time activities and assignments, including due dates and policies for assignments that are turned in late due to illness. We understand that it may be harder for the teacher and that each teacher has their own policies for late work, but not having access to assignments when unable to be in school, and being unable to see what is causing a grade to go down is a complicated struggle.

Schedule

- **We recommend that schools try to keep a consistent weekly schedule as often as possible.**

Many students who were interviewed expressed that any change to class schedules, no matter how small, such as changing from Wednesday/Thursday Block to a week of classes 1-7 after a Monday holiday, made it physically and mentally taxing, resulting in added levels of stress as they struggled to adapt and prepare for the upcoming classes.

Programs and Resources

Access and Confidentiality

- *** **We recommend lessening the restrictions on mental health programs, including needing to get permission from teachers.**

It is important to have a safe, open, CONFIDENTIAL space for students to go to. Interviewed students frequently mentioned how in order to access one resource (SOS/students offering support), they had to get permission from their teacher, which can be difficult for students who are uncomfortable sharing what they're going through. Requiring students to explain to their teachers why they need to go to the program also undermines most of the confidentiality that we expect and value in mental health spaces. This could be addressed by confidential spaces having an attendance or sign-in sheet. Alternatively, rather than needing permission to use counselor and therapy services, students could fill out a google form (which could have a simple question such as "Why are you leaving the classroom" with a dropdown menu or short answer where the student can just write "see counselor") either beforehand or in the moment (by QR-code) and leave class to see their counselor or therapist when they need to without disrupting class. Later, the teacher would be able to access the google form submission and understand that the student had left to see her counselor or therapist and the student would not have to encounter a gatekeeper to access these resources to manage their emotions.

Counseling

- ***We recommend that the schools work to provide more resources centered around mental health, and ensure that there are counselors readily available for students at the school when they need them, without needing to be waitlisted.***

Making sure there are enough counselors and resources at all schools will ensure help for students. As some schools lack counselors, many students have to wait for the next school year to begin to receive counseling, and as a result, many are discouraged to try again.

- ***We recommend dedicating a portion of staff/teacher meetings to talk about solutions for the ongoing mental health crisis.***

Many students feel more comfortable turning to their teachers than a counselor due to the pre-established connection they have with their teachers. If teachers are more knowledgeable, they can provide better help.

- ***We recommend having more counselors from diverse backgrounds or personal experiences. Counseling staff should include counselors who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community; who are from a variety of demographics; who speak languages other than English; and who are male.***

Many students expressed the need for more counselors as well as a lack of familiarity with current counselors.

Other Supports

- ***We recommend that seniors be made aware of a specific class period to work in the college and career center to complete college applications – a time when they can ask questions or clarifications that they and others may have about the college application process. Related, we recommend that the college and career center receives students of all grade levels, especially those who come to high school underprepared in areas related to college and career knowledge, in ways that encourage engagement.***

Creating this type of course and advertising it more would lessen the anxiety and stress surrounding college application season while completing accelerated course work.

- ***We recommend having emotional well-being classes available at schools and/or the district office for parents/guardians and other family members to attend.***

This can help provide more information for families regarding mental health, and can help students with possible struggles at home. Since family life can have a huge impact on studies at school, and interviewees identified home/family life as the biggest influence on their emotional state, schools should provide classes to help students navigate their families. There should also be a way for schools to support families to understand the importance of mental health, such as providing mental health resources.

- ***We recommend starting to have mental health experts as a normal part of a middle schoolers life.***

This could help students feel more comfortable with asking for help in the future.

Engaging Instruction

Teaching Style

Range of Activities

***** We recommend that teachers work to create a variety of activity types within the curriculum, including a mix of independent and group work, using different teaching methods to support all different types of learning styles and increase students' ability to understand the material.**

This means creating opportunities for both group and individual assignments, hands-on projects, and lecture-based classes. This variation will help students to be more engaged. Several students mentioned how it's difficult to focus in classes that are heavily lecture-based, or that rely on other resources, like Edpuzzle. Having more tangible and collaborative lessons would help increase attention spans and help content comprehension.

Using interactive assignments such as student-led discussions, lab activities, friendly competitions across all subjects would make content matter more captivating. It would also help students learn to talk to and be more comfortable with different types of people in separate subject matters helping both introverts and extroverts engage with the material together.

- **We recommend that teachers be encouraged to keep a more consistent and predictable class structure, with an agenda written somewhere in the classroom or on their personal website.**

Communication

***** We recommend working with students to get their feedback on the type of learning that allows them to succeed and thrive in the classroom.**

Feedback could be provided anonymously through a Google form.

- **We recommend that teachers and students grow towards having some type of academically professional relationship that consists of open communication, in order to improve student understanding of the material.**

Students and teachers should feel comfortable engaging with each other, and if they don't they won't be able to work as well together.

Homework Assignments

Building Understanding

- **We recommend having homework assignments that advance understanding of course material and content knowledge, not make up for material not taught in class.**

Related, when teachers don't include instructions on an assignment, this can cause students to have confusion while doing homework or studying for the class.

- **We recommend that mandatory homework should be given only if necessary, and should not interfere with school breaks.**

Optional or supplemental homework should be offered over breaks, allowing students to remain engaged with the materials and promote student responsibility.

Guidance

- **We recommend that for every large project assigned (such as presentations, research papers, etc.) students are provided an example or video representation of an acceptable product.**

This would help clarify instructions or make the process easier and less stressful to complete, and give students the opportunity to do their best work. One suggestion for teachers would be: At the end of each year ask a few current students if they are comfortable leaving their finished projects or a recording of their presentation as examples for the following years' students.

Academic Supports

- **We recommend that all teachers have a designated review for each topic they are focusing on, where they go through what they taught and answer any questions before a test.**

This gives students time to be well prepared, as they have an opportunity to refine their knowledge and catch mistakes.

Middle School Experience

College Knowledge

AP Classes

- **We recommend preparing students, especially those in underserved communities, for AP courses, through informational sessions, assemblies, and teacher announcements.**

This is incredibly important since not everyone knows about AP courses, especially students from underrepresented backgrounds. This can put them at a severe disadvantage in the college application process compared to their peers who have parents or personal advisors/tutors to prepare them. Several students in the interviews mentioned not having enough of this preparation in middle school, leading to them not challenging themselves enough or feeling out of place when they did take them.

College Expectations

- *** **We recommend that in middle school, students are given a general timeline (from middle school through high school graduation) of what colleges expect and justification for why students might do certain things. Aligned with this effort, we recommend taking the time to tell middle school students about options for AP classes and concurrent enrollment courses. This should be a joint responsibility of middle schools to prepare students and high schools to receive them.**

For example, adults may advise 6th to 7th graders to consider engaging in a sport they enjoy. It's important to help middle school students understand that they may engage in extracurriculars such as sports and clubs because colleges look for students to play on their teams, while also looking for involvement in organized activities in applications. Another example would be, before or during Algebra I courses, students may take a supplemental class in tandem or beforehand to help them earn a higher grade in the class. Finally, taking a college course through concurrent enrollment might help students discover their passions before there is more pressure to choose a career path.

- *** **We recommend giving seminars at orientation to incoming freshmen and their families on the basics of GPA, course credits, extracurriculars, and community service; and we recommend that there are also well-advertised, optional workshops going forward.**

These seminars should include guidance to ensure that students and their families know how to track their credits in high school so they can become comfortable with knowing what they need to do in order to graduate from high school.

High School Knowledge

Campus and Classes

- ***We recommend scheduling more shadow programs on specific dates for each high school so that middle school students can become acquainted with the campus before they arrive as freshmen.***

Shadow days provide opportunities to meet current high school students through a buddy match (mentor-mentee) program. Shadow programs help students, especially those who don't have peers going to the same high school as them, to adjust to both the academic and social environment at high school. We recommend that these shadowing opportunities are part of the curriculum so that students don't miss out on any class time.

- ***We recommend that students are introduced to a little bit of the high school curriculum structure. Examples might include emphasizing more independent thought, completing readings in shorter periods, essay writing in English courses, or increased levels of rigor or useful study tools/strategies in math courses.***

It might be that each eighth grade course has one week (not the same week as other courses) each semester where the teacher introduces a high school level learning tool or structure. This will prepare students for transitioning into high school.

Academic Skills and School Processes

- ***We recommend giving students a syllabus and agenda in selected classes to help them know what they are expected to learn and how to manage their time.***

Structuring courses in ways that mirror high school would provide helpful preparation and allow students to build strong habits to support academic success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to:

- The 43 students we interviewed—for sharing their time and their stories with us.
- SUHSD - for giving us the opportunity to engage our peers and strengthen our voice to support our community.
- The Gardner Center team—for bringing us together each week and for teaching, guiding, and coaching us to undertake this important work.
- The Stanford Redwood City Sequoia School Mental Health Collaborative and the Stanford Office of Community Engagement – for believing in the power of youth, and for funding this project.

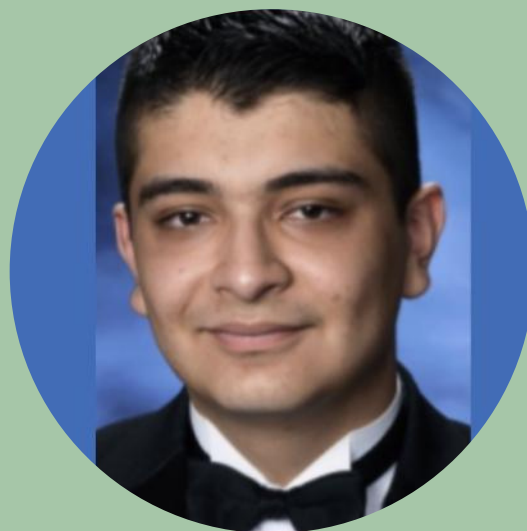


MEET THE SUHSD ACTION RESEARCH TEAM

DAVID DIAZ

Carlmont High School

Hi! I'm David Diaz, and I'm currently a senior at Carlmont High School. I love to do art and writing in my free time to wind down, and I have a deep passion for community building and helping others. My reason for joining this internship is that my family has struggled through tough situations, yet despite that, the school system has been there to help me overcome those challenges. I've also witnessed several friends and people in my life go through mental health struggles, and not get the resources they need to deal with that. I want to help the school system help other fellow marginalized groups and allow them to thrive amidst adversity. This combined with my desire to help others is why I'm planning on studying as a psychology major, to help people going through similar situations. I'm thrilled and honored to work with my fellow interns on such a meaningful project, and hope to gain experience in research for my future in psychology.



CECILIA LOPEZ-SANDOVAL

Woodside High School



Hello everyone! I'm Cecilia Lopez-Sandoval, a current senior at Woodside High School who is interested in entering the psychology field. What interested me to be a part of Sequoia-Stanford Youth Action Research (YAR) was the opportunity to be able to bring light to peers' and students' experiences in high school and how these experiences are taken into consideration. YAR has not only given students the opportunity to voice their opinions and create a better social and learning environment, but has given my fellow interns and I the opportunity to take initiative to be a part of creating a brighter future for students of our district while teaching us useful coding and research tools. I appreciate being given the chance to be a part of YAR and being able to help create a better school environment. Thank you!



MEET THE SUHSD ACTION RESEARCH TEAM

ELIZABETH KAO

Carlmont High School

My name is Elizabeth Kao and I am a senior at Carlmont High School. My vision is to utilize research and technology to address multifaceted issues in communities. The Stanford-Sequoia Action Research Internship's mission of advocating student contribution to policy decisions aligns with my belief that progress would be limited without consideration of diverse opinions. As a future healthcare professional, I envision myself merging my knowledge with ethical and sustainable practices to resolve barriers. Being an intern in this program is the initial phase of my journey to make meaningful advances.



VIANCA LOPEZ MOLINA

Menlo-Atherton High School



Hello! My name is Vianca Lopez Molina, I am a senior at Menlo-Atherton High School in the Sequoia Union High School District. In the fall, I plan to begin classes as a Biological Science major at the University of Southern California! Since I was young, I have always desired to improve my community, whether that change is small or big. So upon learning about this opportunity, I decided to participate in the internship to help contribute to the improvement of my school district. Through my experience as an M-A student, I have seen the faults in our school system and desired to know whether this was common throughout the entire student body. I wanted to learn about the different perspectives in our district and what each individual needs from their schools. Though I have participated in many community service opportunities that allowed me to reconstruct my city of East Palo and improve the ways of living, I believe that my participation in this internship allows me to attack the root of the problem, and give equal opportunity to everyone. I hope that this research will allow there to be more connection between students and their schools.



MEET THE SUHSD ACTION RESEARCH TEAM

ELLEN FORTE

Menlo-Atheron High School

Hello everyone! I'm Ellen Forte, a junior at Menlo-Atherton High School. I decided to join this research internship because of my interest in advocacy programs and improving my local community. Moreover, by participating in this internship, I wanted to help remedy some of the inequalities surrounding mental health resources and academic support through research presentation. Through this internship, I have been able to give a voice to my fellow students and community members' concerns while prioritizing student to teacher communication. As someone who plans on studying psychology and the impact of untreated mental health issues on students in college, this internship gave me an opportunity to improve the mental well-being of the people around me through youth advocacy.



TRINITY TYSON

Redwood High School



My name is Trinity Tyson. I am a graduate from Redwood High School and was part of the Redwood Environmental Academy of Leadership. I would describe myself as imaginative, caring, and conscientious. I joined this internship because it asks students to share their opinions on making changes in their school community. My career goal is to be an actuary, to work with companies to manage risk, lead community forums to support new businesses, and encourage middle and high school students to pursue STEM careers. In college, I will major in actuary science, and in my free time, I plan to travel to many countries to learn how to prepare delicious culinary dishes.



MEET THE SUHSD ACTION RESEARCH TEAM

JOHAN ALEJANDRES

Menlo-Atherton High School

My name is Johan Alejandro. I'm currently a senior at Menlo Atherton High School and I am a victim of the issues that are prevalent for students like me. Specifically speaking, the missed opportunities that students of color face due to the lack of preparation in middle school and the lack of information in high school. Coming into high school I was under prepared, nobody told me what I could do outside of school or about advanced classes which I'd later pursue resulting in me getting imposter syndrome. With the experience I had, I wanted to do something about this problem not only for myself but also for my community to not have to suffer and miss opportunities they deserve to have. Opportunities have again and again opened up for me to deal with the issues I saw on campus through collaboration with students and some of my teachers. This internship however takes it to a new level which is what I have been looking for, a way to directly implement change to the issues that I again and again saw happening to other students not only at my school but the whole district.



DAVID MERAZ

Redwood High School

My name is David Meraz and I am a junior at Redwood High School. I love nature, animals, and most of all: science! I wanted to be a part of this internship because I would have the opportunity to gather and analyze data, which are two important aspects of scientific research. I'm also really interested in learning about issues that are important to my community and bring attention to issues that might otherwise be overlooked. I'm excited about the change that may come from our research!