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# 'BREAK THE STIGMA'



Tracy Hoang, a senior at Pacifica High School, jokes with guidance technician Danielle Nelson Thursday while spending time in The Cove, a new wellness center on campus. The Oxnard Union High School District now has similar centers at all its sites as students return to on-campus instruction. PHOTOS BY ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR

## Wellness centers offer respite as students return to campus

**Shivani Patel**  
Ventura County Star  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Despite the fanfare and celebration around Ventura County students coming back to campuses for in-person learning this school year, administrators are keenly aware it's not quite "back to normal."

Social and emotional well-being are at the forefront of administrators' minds as students ease back into the ebb and flow of an in-person experience. Some campuses have now created spaces where students can receive counseling and related services or just take a break.

At the elementary level, kids are sometimes overwhelmed by being around so many people, said Katie Berry, elementary counselor with the Conejo Valley Unified School District.

With young students, educators are going over basic skills like conflict resolution, turn-taking and sharing among peers outside of what they may be used to at home.

Among older students, there's a lot of social anxiety, administrators said.

Heather Chamberlin-Scholle, Conejo Valley Unified mental health services coordinator, said she's heard anecdotally that students are struggling with how their friend groups have changed after



Students can watch videos together during nutrition breaks and lunch at The Cove, a wellness center at Pacifica High School.

more than a year of online schooling. Some are also tackling a new campus as they go from middle to high school.

Associated Student Body leaders at Moorpark High School spent the summer devising activities and events for new and returning students, motivated by the challenge of re-engaging students, said Sean Burns, a teacher and

ASB director.

There are two grades of students on campuses now that haven't had any exposure to a high school environment, Burns said. That can be overwhelming when a student is going from a middle school campus with a

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### Wellness

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few hundred kids to a high school with more than 1,000 students.

Several districts are implementing wellness centers where students can decompress and also receive so-called wraparound services.

The services cover anything students need to ensure their success and well-being as they transition back to in-person instruction, said Oxnard Union High School District Director of Wellness and Inclusion Preda Rossi. That can include individual or group counseling, workshops and referrals to outside services or simply time to decompress by playing with fidget toys or journaling.

Both Consejo Valley Unified and Oxnard Union have designated rooms on high school campuses for the centers. The schools have made the spaces resemble lounges that, they hope, put students at ease when they stop by.

In the first 10 days of the school year, Chamberlin-Scholle In Conejo said there were more than 600 visits to the centers across the district's high schools.

"What that told us initially was kids are really seeking out the supports," she said.

Some students coming to the centers are experiencing anxiety and depression, she said.

#### Wellness centers

Schools hope to provide a safe and comforting environment as students navigate the return to a campus setting.

Oxnard Union is working with students and youth organizations like BRITE and Future Leaders of America to destigmatize mental health on campus.

Each campus has two adult wellness specialists who run the centers and about 10 student wellness peers. The student peers went through extensive



Tracy Hoang, a senior at Pacifica High School, spends time in The Cove, a wellness center on campus Thursday. The Oxnard Union High School District now has wellness centers at each of its sites as students return to classrooms following COVID-19 disruptions. PHOTOS BY ANTHONY PASCENCA/THE STAR

training over the summer through Ventura County Behavioral Health and other entities.

Tracy Hoang, a senior at Pacifica High School, said she chose to be a wellness peer because she's struggled with her mental health before. She wanted to use the skills she learned through that process to help others.

She's noticed a hesitancy among her peers being back on campus, but not only due to COVID-19 fears. They're also not used to so much social interaction in a campus environment, she said. Some distinct social cues, like a smile, are hidden underneath a mask.

Rio Mesa High School senior Daphne De La Torre said during an Oxnard Union school board meeting last week that using the wellness center has changed her life. As a wellness peer, she aims to encourage others to use the ser-

vice.

Students can simply walk into the centers. Or they can seek out the specialists, teachers or peers like Hoang and De La Torre to confide in. Some of those conversations could lead to a recommendation that they visit the center.

The wellness centers and initiatives have been a long time coming, said Trustee Karen Sher.

"This is a dream come true for me, and for so many others," Sher said after an emotional thank you to the specialists and peers who had presented their efforts at the school board meeting.

#### Communication

Ester Dominguez, a wellness specialist at Pacifica, said outreach to let students know about the wellness centers was a huge effort at Pacifica.

Such outreach efforts are underway

at all of the district's schools, representatives said during the board meeting.

There is also a heavy push on social media, in both English and Spanish, to create awareness, they said. Some schools have taken to posting QR codes around campus.

Dominguez is working with teachers to organize mini-field trips to the wellness center so students can become familiar with the space.

They also have a "Wellness Wednesday" initiative where, during a school broadcast, the wellness peers talk about tips and resources available to students in an effort to destigmatize mental health.

De La Torre said she hopes to advocate for mental health awareness and use of the wellness centers specifically within the Latino community at her school. She said there can be a stigma surrounding mental wellness.

"We don't like to open up about most things, but I want to break the stigma," she said while addressing the school board.

Oxnard Union parent Jessica Vargas, whose daughter is a wellness peer at Oxnard Middle College High School, said it's important for the district and county to also communicate with parents about the initiatives.

Vargas is a lead for parent advocacy group Padres Unidos. On a weekly basis, she talks to parents about taking care of their own mental health for the sake of themselves and their kids.

Several administrators The Star spoke to had the following advice for students who may be struggling: You're not alone. Seek a friend or trusted adult, they said.

Shivani Patel covers education for The Star as a Report for America corps member. Reach her at shivani.patel@vcsstar.com or 805-603-6573. She is also on Twitter at @shivaamp.

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## Students build trust and emotional wellness

October 01, 2021

By Makena Huey  
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TAKING A BREAK—Leilani Shanks, 17, and Vanessa Sossa, 16, enjoy the safe, comfortable surroundings of the new Moorpark Unified School District Wellness Center. DIANNE AVERY/Acorn Newspapers

The concept of social and emotional learning was unfamiliar to many before the mid-1990s.

Now the idea that children need to understand their emotions to overcome challenges is one that many educators say cannot be ignored.

One in five children struggle with their mental health, according to the Child Mind Institute, and that was before students spent months in isolation during the pandemic.

To help, the [Moorpark Unified School District](#) launched a [Wellness Center](#) to prioritize students' emotional well-being.

“Our students are struggling, and their mental health needs to be addressed,” said Marcia Hamilton, the district’s accountability and categorical specialist who oversees all mental health services. “The whole purpose of the Wellness Center is to destigmatize accessing mental health support as well as building awareness and educating individuals on mental health.”

The Wellness Center, located at Moorpark High School, was made possible by the state's Mental Health Services Act Grant, which awarded MUSD nearly \$100,000 for the 2021-22 school year. The Ventura County Office of Education also invited four other districts in the county to participate.



COMFORTABLE SAFE SPACE—The new Moorpark Unified School District Wellness Center offers staff, students, and parents a place to access support, take a break, rest, and refocus. DIANNE AVERY/Acorn Newspapers

The center began offering virtual services—including educational workshops for students, staff, and families—in March 2020. Last month, on Sept. 22, the center held its grand opening and launched in-person services.

The new space is designed not only for relaxation and productivity, but socializing and independence, Hamilton said. It features three TVs as well as weighted blankets, noise-canceling headphones, and mindfulness worksheets.

Students can seek help for themselves, but parents and staff can also refer students to the center, often resulting in weekly appointments.

Counselors can refer students who need additional help to outside services, such as Ventura County Behavioral Health.

While the services are primarily intended for high school students, parents of students at other campuses can request support through the center's website.

The Wellness Center was created to be proactive, Hamilton said. Whether students are struggling with depression or anxiety or just having a bad day and want to talk, the center strives to prevent crises.

"It's important that students recognize that they can go to a space to share community with other people regardless of how they are feeling," Hamilton said. "They can go when they are feeling happy and engaged, and they can go if they are feeling down."

Because of the stigma that often surrounds mental illness, it's not surprising that some students would be afraid to ask for help, district counselor Briauna Barnett said.

The most rewarding aspect of her work at the center, she said, is seeing how open students have been in discussing their challenges.

"It's been incredible to watch them feel so comfortable to talk to the peers and to talk to us," Barnett said.

Twenty high school seniors work at the center as "wellness peers," helping to raise awareness about mental health and the center's services. They were nominated by teachers and counselors and completed training over the summer.

The peers normalize the idea of asking for help; they come from a place of compassion and strive to replace shame with empowerment, the counselors said.

"The peers make other students feel comfortable and are a bridge between us as mental health professionals and the students at the school," Barnett said. "Because we all know it's not easy for kids to trust an adult they just met."

Staff, Hamilton said, aim to engage students who are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges, especially students of color.

"We are trying to create a welcoming, warm space where diversity is celebrated and where students can come to feel included and supported," Hamilton said.

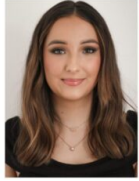
The diversity of the peer mentors also helps students feel represented, Hamilton said.

As a Latina woman, Alexandra Buenrostro-Rangel, the wellness center's counselor and coordinator, said her identity enables her to better build connection and trust with students.

"Some of the students have told me, 'The fact that you look like me makes me feel a lot better,'" she said. "I understand where a lot of these students come from, and I also like to share my story and share my struggles so they feel comfortable."

More than anything, she said, the students she interacts with are simply seeking to focus on their relationships after such a long period of isolation.

For more information about Moorpark Unified School District's Wellness Center, visit [sites.google.com/mrpk.org/musd-wellness-center/home](https://sites.google.com/mrpk.org/musd-wellness-center/home).



**Makena Huey**

Makena Huey is a news reporter for the Moorpark Acorn. She earned her bachelor's degree in English with a minor in journalism from Pepperdine University. She was editor-in-chief of Pepperdine's magazine, managing editor of the newspaper and executive editor of the nationally-recognized student news organization.



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# Registration is Open

## CA START Open House

**What is an Open House?** A live, online forum (via Zoom) to provide an overview of the START model, CA START implementation, and information about the RFP process. There will be time for Q&A with the Center for START Services and CA START at the end of the forum.

**Intended Audience:** Potential providers of new START programs. While this forum is hosted by the CA START expansion, other interested providers are welcome to attend.

## 2 Open House Session Dates Available

### Option 1

Monday, October 18  
1:00-2:30 pm PST/  
4:00-5:30pm EST

### Option 2

Monday, November 1  
1:00-2:30 pm PST/  
4:00-5:30pm EST

**REGISTER NOW**

START, which stands for Systemic, Therapeutic, Assessment, Resources & Treatment, is a comprehensive model of services and supports that optimizes independence, treatment, and community living for individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD) and behavioral health needs.



*Now We Have Hope: The Strength of the START Community* is a documentary film about START programs and the people and families they support in North Carolina, Texas, and New York City.

Watch the film and learn more about START at [www.centerforstartservices.org](http://www.centerforstartservices.org)

From: **MHSOAC Communications** <[Communications@mhsoac.ca.gov](mailto:Communications@mhsoac.ca.gov)>

Date: Mon, Oct 11, 2021 at 5:28 PM

Subject: MHSOAC Update: The Agenda for the October 21, 2021 Immigrant and Refugee Listening Session Teleconference Meeting Has Been Posted to the MHSOAC Website



The agenda for the Immigrant and Refugee Listening Session Teleconference Meeting being held on October 21, 2021, has been published to our website at the following location:

[mhsoac.ca.gov](http://mhsoac.ca.gov) > Connect With Us: All Events > [Immigrant and Refugee Listening Session – October 21, 2021](#)

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