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A Place at School Where Students Can Unload Stress and Worry

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Adithya Sambamurthy/The Bay Citizen

Students at Galileo Academy of Science and Technology in San Francisco used chalk to express their feelings last week during an emotional health workshop.

Last week about 20 students sat in Room 466 at Galileo Academy of Science and Technology, writing down all the ways that people abuse one another. Rapes and beatings topped the lists. One boy asked, "What if you just have someone tell you you're not going to get far in life?"

The exercise was part of a daylong effort to help students understand how typical teen-age stress over grades, prom and heartache can become paralyzing amid larger issues like violent

relationships, broken homes and illegal [immigration](#).

Galileo, a public high school in the Marina district, devoted 28 class periods to workshops on emotional health, and the staff of the school's Wellness Center turned Galileo's quad into an outreach event featuring music, games and prizes.

More than a third of Galileo's 2,200 students sought help from the center last year for depression, anger, anxiety, [substance abuse](#), grief, trauma, and physical and sexual health. During a given week, 300 to 400 Galileo students receive individual or group services, from counseling to clinic appointments.

Over the last decade, the San Francisco Unified School District has built a pioneering support network to help teenagers escape the private suffering of [adolescence](#) that erases the line between nurturing emotional health and providing an education.

"They'll come with their stress, not ready to work on math," said Jessica Stein Colvin, Galileo's wellness coordinator, "and we try to prepare them to face the day."

In a recent districtwide survey of teachers who had referred students to Wellness Centers, three-quarters reported greater academic success. Eighty-six percent said they noticed that the students had improved emotional well-being.

The demand for services is growing throughout the district. Wellness Centers at 15 of San Francisco's high schools served more than 7,000 students last year, almost half the public high school population. Counting repeat visits, the Galileo Wellness Center handled more than 17,000 drop-ins.

"Our No. 1 need is more [mental health](#) clinicians," Ms. Colvin said. "There is mental health therapy happening here all the time. Every single clinical space is used every hour of the day."

Rahsaan, a 17-year-old a senior at Galileo, broke up with his girlfriend last year. He is estranged from his parents and siblings — he has lived in the Bayview district with his disabled grandfather, whom he has cared for for more than 10 years.

Last semester, he said, his grades plummeted when he hit an emotional wall.

"I was outside and one of the teachers saw me crying and they brought me down here," Rahsaan said. "Jessica and the other teacher stayed here after school to make sure I wasn't going to harm myself or anything. It helped me a lot because I was, like, literally going to kick somebody's ass and not care about the consequences."

Ms. Colvin connected Rahsaan with a 24-hour support program in his neighborhood. This year, he has been dropping into the Wellness Center almost every day to relax or talk about things on his mind.

"We want them to understand, 'I have these feelings but I'm safe,' " Ms. Colvin said. " 'But if something big happens in my life, I know where to go.' "

The San Francisco Wellness Initiative is a joint project of the district and the city's Department of Children, Youth and their Families, and the Department of Public Health. The centers were created in the wake of the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, as schools around the country focused resources on campus security and troubled youths.

Kevin Gogin, program director of the district's School Health Programs, said the schools saw a greater opportunity.

"We took an approach that was particular to random acts of violence and decided to go broad and provide a spectrum of services so we could reach as many students as possible," Mr. Gogin said.

Michael Baxter, director of youth programs for the Department of Public Health, said the wellness teams had found success through their integration into the schools and innovative approaches to reaching students.

"They're always looking for what's out there, what kind of services have evidence behind them and are worthwhile interventions," Mr. Baxter said.

A growing number of students seeking help are immigrants or refugees. A third of Galileo's students were born outside the United States. Some carry the secret of their illegal-immigrant parents. Others are separated from relatives or are cared for by a changing roster of family members who move in and out of the country.

"Grief and loss is huge," said Ulash Dunlap, a therapist at Galileo. "Even students who have been here for five years — that loss takes a long time to settle."

In a 2010 district survey of students who had participated in wellness programs, 81 percent reported coming to school more often as a result; 69 percent reported academic improvement. Ninety percent said there was an adult in the Wellness Center who cared about them.

Vilma, Rashon and Michelle, all 17-year-old seniors, attend a girls' group through the Wellness Center each week with about a dozen other students.

"Everybody's basically being open and they feel comfortable enough to share stuff that they wouldn't normally share if we were walking down the hallway," Rashon said.

Vilma and Michelle used to skip a lot of classes to party or hang out at the movies all day. Their grade point averages dropped below 2.0.

"All we wanted to do was go out, have fun, smoke, drink, not go to school," Vilma said. "Because of the fun we had then, right now we're going to night school."

Aside from school, Vilma is also stressed about her boyfriend, who is 18 and was recently

arrested. "I really care about him," she said. "He's not a kid anymore. He's not going to juvie, he's going to county."

The workshops and events at Galileo last week were the school's biggest push yet to destigmatize emotional health issues. During third period, 40 students gathered in the library to talk about stress. Casey Gold, the Wellness Center's community health outreach worker, asked, "How many of you have felt stress before?" Thirty hands shot up.

Patrick Delaney, the school librarian, watched from the back of the room.

"Libraries are places where quiet kids generally gravitate," Mr. Delaney said, "but quiet doesn't necessarily mean happy or contented or at peace. One of the things I'm seeing a lot of that I did not see as much before is depression. One kid came to me and said, 'Everything is flat. I feel like I'm carrying a backpack full of rocks.'"

During a lunch break, music blared on the quad as students played carnival games and won prizes for answering questions on emotional health. As the bell announced the end of lunch, 14-year-old Brandon Wilson bounded through a crowd of students, landed in front of a spin-the-wheel game and asked a woman, "Can I play one last time?"

He spun the wheel, which stopped on the words, "Signs of stress." The woman told him to name three. Bouncing on his toes, he said, "Keeping to yourself, low self-esteem, starting to go crazy."

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