

HELPING
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ALMADEN VALLEY

CHILDREN'S THERAPY CENTER

August 20, 2020

Dear San Jose Unified School District Leadership,

I am writing this letter to share with you the profound concerns I have for the children in our community. Before getting into the reasons for my concerns I want to commend you for pivoting quickly during this unprecedented time – a time that we could have never predicted or planned for. Keeping children home and safe is, although not ideal, essential right now. I recognize making a plan for a district of this size come with more challenges than meets the eye. I know you are having to make a one size fits all plan for an entire community that certainly does not all have the same needs. No matter the plan, you will not be able to make a perfect solution for everyone. With that being said, I feel that the current plan is less than ideal and has the potential to negatively impact many students far longer than this pandemic will last.

As an occupational therapist I have extensive training in child development and I am deeply worried about the long term psychosocial affects the current learning/school structure will have on this generation of youth (on top of the impacts living through a global pandemic will have on them). I implore San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) to reevaluate how the current structure is setting our children up for far more difficulties than the potential benefits they may be receiving from it. Research is clear that technology is harmful to children's developing brains. Additionally, based on trauma research, we now know that parental stress and anxiety are strong correlates for poor outcomes for children.

Prior to this pandemic, research was clear that children needed more opportunities for unstructured play, movement and exploration. The evidence supporting increasing recess is strong. The American Academy of Pediatrics underscores the benefits of unstructured play on healthy brain development including promoting intelligence, creativity, imagination and resilience. In studies comparing the academic and behavioral outcomes of

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children who either receive opportunities to engage in unstructured play and those who don't, it is clear that play is critical to optimal development. Countless studies have shown that students all across our country have less recess time than previous generations and we have the chance to change that. During the pandemic, prior to school resuming, when driving down residential streets it became evident that play was returning to our world. Although maybe not recommended or safe due to the pandemic, neighborhood children were playing together again!

In addition to promoting the benefits of movement and unstructured play, the AAP also released a statement in 2016 outlining the negative impacts of technology. In their statement they indicate that risks associated with excessive media use "include negative health effects on sleep, attention, and learning; a higher incidence of obesity and depression; exposure to inaccurate, inappropriate, or unsafe content and contacts; and compromised privacy and confidentiality." A research article in The Journal of the American Medical Association answered the question: Is frequent use of modern digital media platforms, such as social media, associated with occurrence of ADHD symptoms during adolescence? Their findings? "In this longitudinal cohort survey study of adolescents aged 15 and 16 years at baseline and without symptoms of ADHD, there was a significant association between higher frequency of modern digital media use and subsequent symptoms of ADHD over a 24-month follow-up." Child development experts also have taught us that the younger a child is the more moldable their brains are – called neuroplasticity. If we see brain changes happening for adolescence with excessive screen use it is undeniable that the impacts on 5, 6 even 10-year olds will be even more profound and detrimental.

The final point I want to touch on is parental stress and its impact on children's long-term development. We as a society are experiencing increased stress related to the pandemic as well as the polarizing state of our nation right now. Parents are undoubtedly feeling the impacts of the pandemic more than anyone. Managing jobs, childcare, lack of jobs, health and safety of their family, increased behaviors from their children, lack of respite just to name a few. According to Mental Health America (MHA), more than a quarter million people took a mental health screening in July which is the highest number in the six years that the tool has been available. "In July, more than 72,000 of our screeners indicated moderate to severe symptoms of depression, more than 39,000 had moderate to severe systems of

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anxiety, and more than 19,000 had symptoms of psychosis” according to MHA President, Paul Gionfriddo. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which include having a family member with mental health concerns, can have negative, lasting effects on the health, wellbeing, and lifelong opportunities including disruption of healthy brain development, social development, immune systems, and can lead to substance misuse and other unhealthy coping behaviors (CDC). The challenges inherently present during this pandemic cannot be taken away. They exist and we must do everything we can as a society to minimize the impacts this will have on our next generation. What is being asked of parents right now is adding additional and unnecessary stress. Parents are not meant to be their child’s teacher. They are not meant to be IT support. They are not meant to be an all-day cafeteria worker or recess monitor. Many are quitting their jobs because they feel there is no other way. In fact, one day after school started, one of my own employees let me know she needed to stop working because it was impossible to juggle it all. While we don’t have the choice to send children back to in person school –nor do I think we should – we do have the power to make this a little less difficult on our parents.

I urge you to do the following in order to minimize the potential long-term detrimental impacts on our communities next generation:

- Decrease the amount of time children are expected to be in front of a computer
 - One Suggestion: morning instruction and afternoon instruction with time for independent work/office hours in between
- Increase the amount of time children are expected to play (allow recess to be facilitated by parents if desired)
- Modify the bell schedule to be consistent so families with multiple young children do not have to spend their entire day managing it

In summary, I commend the SJUSD leadership for pivoting quickly and trying to solve the many issues that exists with resuming education. Unfortunately, the current school structure is developmentally inappropriate and has requirements that research has shown to have negative impacts on children’s long-term health, overall wellbeing and lifelong outcomes. Parents are stressed more than ever

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before which is not entirely avoidable but there are opportunities to make things a little less difficult for them. You have the power to change a lot of lives... I hope you will make the choice to change them for the better.

Regards,



Brittney Weinerth MS, OTR/L

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