

An Open Letter to LGSUHSD District Leadership and School Board:

We are concerned about all of us and here is why. As certificated representatives of the leadership body at Saratoga High, we have identified that student stress is high and teacher morale is at a record low. Additionally, trust and communication between respective share-holders is problematic.

In light of the ongoing pandemic, and with actionable respect and care of students and staff, we urge district leaders and the board to postpone huge decisions and undertakings, like employing PLCs and any potential curriculum redesign, for this year and allow us to focus on teaching. We ask that you give us time to be with students and resources to help them the best ways we know how.

We are not alone in our concerns. This [recent article](#) "Teachers are Barely Hanging on. Here is What They Need" by Jennifer Gonzales captures how teachers across the nation feel overwhelmed and underappreciated. The article thoughtfully articulates potential solutions: fewer meetings, no new initiatives, hire help for administrative, clerical, and supervisory work, treat teaching time as precious, compensation for extra work, and even have administrators offer to spend the day in our shoes.

Specifically, we believe that student and teacher wellness should be the number one district priority as we are all still very much teaching and learning during a pandemic. Those in the thick of it live and breathe a certain fatigue that weighs heavily upon us. Student stress levels are extremely high, as evidenced by the following indicators:

- High number of wellness center referrals
- Post pandemic class drops
- Post pandemic course changes
- Percentage of students in classes with accommodations (and the types of accommodations noted)
- More self-harm issues/concerns
- Number of students struggling with anxiety and sadness

Additionally, staff are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, frustrated, and sad. There are fewer staff overall but an increase in demands. While much of what happens inside the classroom is going very well, teachers are continually being asked to do more with less and we are really feeling it. Teacher expectations continually grow and in addition to our normal workload, the last two years have also included:

- Advisory
- Utilizing new technology: e-hallpass, various digital tools: PearDeck, Zoom, etc.
- Hybrid teaching
- Health and attendance screening via Screener19
- Increased emergency preparedness roles
- Learning-loss curriculum revision
- Supporting students with significantly reduced tutorial time
- Representing our departments and site in district advisory committees: Curriculum alignment, Anti-Racism, Culture of Consent, bell schedule, GPA alignment, Portrait of a Graduate, etc.
- Staff members retired and were not replaced, resulting in higher workload overall for those

remaining (including but not limited to increased number of preps for some staff members)

- Significant administration turnover resulting in a bumpy start to the 2021-2022 school year
- Teaching new courses that were not initiated by staff
- Staff members managing moving between schools

Teachers are spending more time than ever collaborating with team partners to adapt/adjust to the pandemic, meeting with student groups, attending student support meetings (parent meetings, SST, 504, IEP), and with student and family communication. The demands on teacher time are immense.

Without a doubt, the professionalism of our staff and our passion for the job is a key component to the success of this district. Teachers already work well beyond our contract hours (committees, letters of rec, clubs, class advisors, attending school events, subbing, etc.), and these new additions add a crushing weight.

We simply cannot take on even more.

While at times we do feel supported, we are concerned that those removed from the classroom are focused on forging ahead with huge decisions like curriculum alignment/revision and PLCs. The staff has spoken up numerous times regarding the timing and the validity of these and other issues and we do not feel heard. When community members/staff/students articulate concerns, it does not appear that stakeholder opinions hold equal value and more control than ever is in the school board's hands.

Are we all part of a team who works together to make the best decision for kids, or are we simply a top-down district at this point?

Recently it was made crystal clear that the curriculum alignment committee, which shouldn't have even commenced given the ongoing pandemic, is advisory in nature only and that the school board will ultimately make the alignment decisions as they see fit. In the last several years, we have seen the school board micromanaging in many areas and using their power to make final decisions regardless of the feedback of ALL stakeholders: for example, the bell schedule (implementation and now potential changes) and the addition of AP Physics C at SHS. While school boards may have this power, when and why they use it should still be scrutinized. It is demoralizing to see hard work thrown to the wayside without persuasive explanations as to why, especially when the decision goes against the evidence presented to them by a large group of stakeholders.

We feel it is important that our department leadership group – educated professionals – are respected and regarded as a body that provides critical and insightful information to help shape policy and make decisions regarding the bell schedule, curriculum alignment, certain budget decisions and course content as these decisions impact the mental health and well-being of our students and staff.

We urge district leaders and the board to:

- Defer to teacher expertise in all areas regarding curriculum and instruction
- Be sure they are listening and giving equal weight to ALL stakeholders, especially students and teachers, rather than the loudest voices or those in key positions of power

- Use statistical data from large groups to inform your decisions
- Refer back to our WASC comments regarding student health and wellness and be sure it is at the forefront of future decisions
- Work to mend the rift between us
- Communicate clearly, frequently, and with compassion and respect ●
Implement shared decision-making

Let's figure out how to reunite as a team and work to put this district back together.

Sincerely,

The Saratoga High School Department Chairs

Michael Tyler, English

Alinna Satake, Guidance

Kristen Hamilton, Math

Natasha Ritchie, Media Arts

Jason Shiuan, Performing Arts

Rick Ellis, Physical Education

Kristen Thomson, Science

Hana Chen, Social Studies

Brian Elliott, Special Education

Audrey Warmuth, STEM

Joel Tarbox, Visual Arts

Sarah Voorhees, World Languages