

PAUSD High School Guidance Program Review: Review and Critique

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Other resources:

[PAUSD High School Guidance Program Review](#) (original report)

[PAUSD High School Guidance Program Review: The Missing Table](#) (for tables number M.x).

[PAUSD High School Guidance Program Review: The Missing Comparison](#)

This document provides a review of issues and weaknesses in the PAUSD report on the counseling systems at the two high schools. These issues fall into several major areas:

- Statements that are not tied to evidence (for example, discussion of outcomes without presentation of data about outcomes).
- Statements that are not consistent with the evidence that is offered to support them, or other evidence in the report (for example, see the first item below).
- Statements that are misleading because they fail to take account of the availability of comparison data between the two high schools.

Page 3: On page 3, the report states that Gunn students find counselors “responsive to and effective at supporting students with social-emotional challenges.” There is scant evidence to support this statement. For example, fewer than a third of students agreed with the statement “when I am struggling with a personal issue my Guidance Counselor is among the first adults at school I would go to for help” (Table M.3). Fewer than a third said that they would be comfortable doing so (Table M.3) and only 10% of Gunn students have ever actually gone to a Guidance Counselor for that help (page 24).

The report itself is internally contradictory on this point, noting that “the majority [of Gunn students] may not see Guidance Counselors as sources of social-emotional support.” See page 19. Moreover, only 27% of Gunn students felt that if they were struggling with a personal issue their guidance counselor would even be “among the first adults at school” that they would approach for help (Table M.3). Three-fourths of students thus do not even place their guidance counselor “among the first adults” to whom they would turn. These data contradict the proposition that Gunn’s guidance system is responsive and effective in supporting students with social-emotional challenges.

Page 20: On page 20, the report states that the Gunn system provides an “opportunity for Guidance Counselors to get to know students and provide at least one consistent adult relationship for students during high school.” The data in the report do not support and tend to contradict this statement. For example, only 26% of Gunn freshmen and 45% of all Gunn students feel that their counselor “knows me and understands my goals and challenges,” and only 37% of Gunn freshmen and 53% of Gunn students are satisfied with the level of support they receive from their Gunn counselor. See Table M.1.

Meanwhile, as Tables M.1 and M.2 show, students at Paly felt that both their TAs and their Guidance Counselors know them and are familiar with their goals and challenges far more than students at Gunn did about their Guidance Counselors, particularly in the earlier grades. Thus there is little support for the idea that the Gunn system is achieving success in providing consistent adult relationships during high school.

Page 20: On page 20, the report states without support that a “benefit of full time counselors is that they are able to address problems more immediately than if they are part time or also sustaining teaching duties.” Yet, the far higher satisfaction ratings at Paly with both TAs and Guidance Counselors as support for personal issues and social emotional support render this statement misleading at best. See Tables M.3 and M.4, *passim*.

Page 20: On page 20, the report states without support that “counselors are widely regarded as very hardworking and dedicated to student well-being.” Yet a few pages later, the report acknowledges that very few students (only 10%) at Gunn have actually gone to a guidance counselor for help with a personal problem. Fewer than half of students even report that their counselor knows them (45%), understands them (45%), is an important resource (49%), or are satisfied (53%) with the support they receive from their counselor (Table M.1). When compared with the rates reported by Paly students these questions for TAs (72% are satisfied with the level of support they get from their TA) and Paly counselors (63% are satisfied with the level of support they get from their Paly counselor), the differences are large and consistent (Table M.1).

Page 20. On page 20 the report states that at Gunn “the Guidance Counselor-student relationship does grow from 9th through 12th grade,” without acknowledging that the rates of satisfaction for 9th and 10th graders are extremely low, particularly when compared with the higher rates of satisfaction at Paly. For example, only 26% of 9th graders and 44% of 10th graders at Gunn feel that “my guidance counselor knows me and understands my goals and challenges,” compared with over 50% on both categories for both TAs and Paly guidance counselors for the same grades (Table M.2). It is not surprising that the report text focuses on 12th grade satisfaction rates for Gunn, as it is the only grade for which satisfaction with Guidance Counselors at Gunn appears to be even minimally acceptable or at all comparable to Paly. Even for seniors, however, Paly students are more satisfied with the service they receive from their TAs than are Gunn students with their Guidance Counselors. See Table M.2.

Page 22. On page 22, the report states that “student outcomes” and surveys show that Gunn students feel well prepared and well informed about academic plans. Yet the report contains no evidence about outcomes and performs no analysis to determine whether or not student outcomes are related to the counseling program and if so, how. A similar statement is not found in the similar passage on the Paly system and no mention of outcomes or analysis of outcomes is present in that portion of the report either. See page 31.

Page 24. There are tables that are missing from this document, as indicated by the frequent citation of item numbers without reference tables. For example, the report states on page 24

that “10% of students have gone to their Guidance Counselor for support with a personal issue,” a number which is extremely low when compared to the relevant proportion of Paly students (19%) seeking help from a Paly guidance counselor for a personal issue (Table 19, page 35). The Paly number is found in Table 19, yet no similar table appears for Gunn; the 10% figure merely appears in the text. However, viewing the Paly table suggests that a similar Gunn table would be even less flattering than this 10% suggests, given that 33% of Paly freshmen report having sought help from a Paly guidance counselor for a personal issue, while only 26% of Gunn freshmen even believe that their Gunn counselor knows who they are. See Table M.2.

Another example of a missing table is found on page 34, where the report states that “of the students surveyed who have been to a TA and/or Guidance Counselor” at Paly more than 80% agreed that the TA or guidance counselor was able to help them or refer them to other resources. This “more than 80%” number likely compares to the 73% reported satisfaction of Gunn students who sought help from a guidance counselor reported on page 24. Yet there are no tables for either school, so it is impossible draw the direct comparison.

Page 26. On page 26, the report states that “close[] to 60% of 11th and 12th graders” agree that they have enough time with their Guidance Counselor to plan their academic and post-secondary goals. But as Table M.5 shows, this is factually inaccurate. The actual number for 11th graders is **47%**, which is not only not “close to 60%,” it is even lower than the 48% overall number. The relevant comparator number for Paly’s 11th graders is 68%, **a satisfaction gap of more than 20 percentage points**. Only Gunn seniors come anywhere close to Paly’s satisfaction with the amount of time that their counselors spend on their academic and post-secondary goals, and in that instance they are tied. See Table M.5.

Page 26. On page 26, the report states that “Related [sic], students who are very proactive about seeking help from adults or who are clearly struggling are being served well and responsively.” There is no support cited for this statement, and no evidence for it in the tables presented. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that this is not the case, since only 10% of students at Gunn ever receive help from a Guidance Counselor compared with 19% at Paly (Table M.6). Only 45% of Gunn students overall feel that their guidance counselor knows them, compared with 61% of Paly students who feel that their TA knows them, and 53% who feel that their Paly counselor knows them (Table M.2). These numbers fail to provide support for the statement that students, even “proactive” students at Gunn are being served “well and responsively,” let alone when compared with Paly.

Page 27. On page 27, the report notes that only 45% of gunn students feel that their counselor knows them or understands their goals and challenges, and attributes this low rate to the “general challenge” of managing a large caseload of 325 students. However, the report fails to mentioning that at Paly the corresponding proportion of students is 61% (See Table M.2). This comparison makes the report’s lengthy list of “potential ways to improve Guidance Counselor’s ability to individualize advisory time” on the next page somewhat odd, given that this problem has already been solved at Paly.

Page 32. The report misstates and likely reverses the causal explanation for the usage pattern of psychological services at the two schools. The report speculates that students at Paly do not confide in their TAs about psychological problems because the TA writes the college letter (p.32). However students at Paly use guidance counselors at twice the rate of Gunn students for personal problems (Table M.6) and have a much higher trust of their TA when they are struggling academically (Table M.5 shows that 74% of Paly students trust their TA to help them when they are struggling academically, compared to 58% trust of Gunn students for their guidance counselors). Table M.3 shows that across all grades all students are far more likely to approach a Paly guidance counselor than a Gunn guidance counselor for personal issues. Paly students are also more likely to go to their TA with a personal issue than Gunn students are to approach a guidance counselor (table M.4), a fact that is particularly significant given that many Paly students are evidently aware of the fact that TAs have no expertise or training in personal and psychological support (page 36). Thus, the depiction of Paly students as reluctant to confide problems in a TA is inaccurate when viewed in the context of the Gunn data.

A more coherent explanation for these data are that students are reluctant to seek help from a guidance counselor at Gunn, *particularly when they are struggling academically or personally*, because the guidance counselor plays the dual role of writing the college letter and providing psychological and academic support. At Paly, by contrast, the college letter and academic advising is done by the TA, so the student is free to seek psychological and academic support from the trained guidance professional without the perceived risk of undermining the college letter.

Page 35-36. The report states that at Paly “significant portions of students are reluctant to go to either TAs or Guidance Counselors about personal issues,” citing as evidence that only 35% of seniors would go to a guidance counselor for personal issues and only 40% would approach their TAs. However, the comparison proportion of seniors at Gunn is 26%, making these numbers look quite high by contrast (Table M.4).

Pages 36-37. The report goes into some detail about the desire of students and parents to be able to select TAs to maximize the connection between student and teacher. Though students are able to select their TA, the report states that students would like more information about the TAs prior to making the selection given the importance of the TAs role in writing the college letter. Yet the report does not mention that by contrast, guidance counselors at Gunn are assigned alphabetically, giving students and parents no choice whatsoever over the assignment of the person who will write the college letter at Gunn.

Other Issues

The report fails to discuss the historical survey data from WASC and strategic planning surveys that provide information on guidance surveys. A summary of that data is available

at http://wecandobetterpaloalto.org/downloads/counseling_gap_facts.pdf and is consistent with the new data. It also shows consistently higher levels of dissatisfaction with Gunn counselors than with the TA model in place at Paly.

The report recounts disturbing statistics on academic stress (pages 8-9). 40% at both schools feel that they will have failed if they do not get into a “top college.” Around $\frac{2}{3}$ feel pressured to take a heavy load of AP and honors courses. $\frac{2}{3}$ feel “tremendous pressure” to succeed in school and $\frac{2}{3}$ feel anxiety about workload. Given these numbers, it is an urgent matter that the guidance systems are optimized for both schools. The fact that students are better served, particularly in 9th and 10th grades, but also in the upper grades by the TA model, means that it is imperative that Gunn move swiftly to implement a TA system.

One of the most significant failures of this report is to directly compare the 9th grade experience for students at the two high schools. The 9th grade is where Gunn’s counseling program comes up most short when compared to Paly’s. That failure leaves this document riddled with elisions, distortions, and misrepresentations of the data. For example, on page 38, the report states that “only” 68% of 9th graders agree that their TA makes time for them if they need help. However, the corresponding percentage at Gunn is 54%. The ninth grade comparisons in Tables M.1 and M.2 reveal wide gulfs in satisfaction, many in excess of 20 percentage points for 9th and 10th graders. Presenting Paly’s numbers in a vacuum free of this comparison leaves the incorrect impression that “only” 68% is a low number when it is actually a high number.

The report almost certainly understates the gap in connectedness, service provision, and satisfaction between the guidance departments at the two schools. This is because the report separately assesses the number of students at Paly who have received help or support from a guidance counselor and a TA. While there is likely overlap between these categories, they are certainly not entirely coterminous. Thus, Table M.1 shows that 70% of freshmen at Paly feel that their guidance counselor makes time for them if they need help, and Table M.2 reports that 68% of Paly freshmen feel that their TA makes time for them if they need help. Thus, it is likely that these two overlapping groups of freshmen together constitute well in excess of 70% of freshmen, compared with 54% of Gunn freshmen. Similarly, 71% of Paly sophomores are satisfied with the level of support they receive from their Paly Guidance Counselors and an additional overlapping 75% of Paly sophomores are satisfied with the level of support they receive from their TAs. Together these groups comprise significantly more than 75% of Paly sophomores who feel satisfied with the level of support and connectedness they have with a teacher or counselor, compared with the 58% of Gunn sophomores who feel similarly.

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