

## **DAS Comments to TCA Board – Task Force + Health & Wellness (March 13, 2017)**

Good evening board members and those that are present from the community tonight to hear about a vital, challenging, and difficult topic for all of us at TCA – it is difficult for *parents*, for *students*, for *staff*, and for *administrators*. First let me emphasize, we are all in this together. This evening, I have only a short time to address a topic that has involved discussion, just amongst TCA leadership, on the order of a year’s worth of board meetings. I ask for your understanding as I read from a prepared text – for there is much that needs to be shared.

Tonight, I need to be direct and honest. I think we can agree that many times, in today’s society, comments are made, remarks are easily taken out of context, and people readily just talk around each other. Let’s not do that tonight. Directly addressing suicides, asking pointed questions about emotional distress (which is listed in our Core Values), and talking about mental health issues are not a negative, we need more of it.

Never did I imagine a little over 18-months ago that I would have attended five memorial services for students that were in some way associated with TCA that are no longer with us. In light of those losses, I hope to speak tonight for some voices that are not always heard – for the administrator that is heart-broken and struggles to sleep due to concern over their students, for the staff member that has shed more tears in a year for students than they have in a 30-year career, for the students that have sat down with me personally and shared their fears and struggles, and for the parents that have pleaded with me that we do more and to those parents that have likewise asked that we not venture down certain paths.

For board members, you have a lengthy document in your read-aheads outlining Task Force and other efforts that have occurred at TCA since December 2015. I will limit my reference to that document to a few key points as we move forward this evening. In October of this year, Dr. Scott Poland addressed over 600 in our parent community on the topic *Parenting in Challenging Times* (he also addressed all our teaching staff the following morning) – he gave

tips for parents, ideas to consider for leadership and staff, and gave us tremendous support in a great time of difficulty. Those difficulties continue today. I stand before you this evening and state plainly there are no easy answers. If there were, communities across this country would have taken those actions, the state of Colorado and Colorado Springs would have taken those steps, and TCA and DCC and other schools that face this crisis would have implemented those definitive measures immediately to stop this. This problem is bigger than TCA – it is a societal issue, a community issue, a faith-based issue, a family issue. But that does not mean we do not have a role – as a school we are part of society, the community, and engage with over 2,500 families.

In his message in October, Dr. Poland briefly mentioned the idea, if I remember correctly, in response to a parent question, the possibility of forming a staff Task Force to deal with the issues we are facing. The next morning, I was in Dr. Sojourner’s office outlining the thoughts to do just that – create a Task Force to deal with issues related to wellness. Our name was simply The Task Force – and in the first meeting with school leadership to discuss the topic, and with the first Task Force group meeting, we began with the three words Dr. Sojourner has stressed since day one for him at TCA – we want to have SAFE, HAPPY, and GOOD students. In my mind that was our charge – as a Task Force – examine what we can do to ensure that students are SAFE, HAPPY, and GOOD. The Task Force currently consists of 13 staff members – there are plans for it to grow further. Those members are: **Sean Shields**, HS Principal; **Hugh DiPreto**, JH Principal; **Steve Wright**, College Pathways Principal; **Don Stump**, NE Principal; **Jenny Combs**, Director of Student Support Services (Psychologist), **Matt Sutton**, Psychologist; **Blake Galvin**, Dean of Secondary Educational Philosophy; **Felicity Taylor**, HS Counselor; **Lea List**, JH Counselor, **Suzanne Laffely**, CP Counselor; **Amber Morse**, Elementary Counselor; **Jennifer Whitmarsh**, Elementary Nurse; and **Wes Jolly**, Director of Academic Services.

The TIME magazine cover story on November 7, 2016 was titled *Anxiety, Depression and the American Adolescent*. The article by Susanna Schrobsdorff begins - the kids are not all right. Please bear with me as I read the intro to the article: “The first time Faith-Ann Bishop cut

herself, she was in eighth grade. It was 2 in the morning, and as her parents slept, she sat on the edge of the tub at her home outside Bangor, Maine, with a metal clip from a pen in her hand. Then she sliced into the soft skin near her ribs. There was blood – and a sense of deep relief. ‘It makes the world very quiet for a few seconds,’ says Faith-Ann. ‘For a while I didn’t want to stop, because it was my only coping mechanism. I hadn’t learned any other way.’ The pain of the superficial wound was a momentary escape from the anxiety she was fighting constantly, about grades, about her future, about relationships, about everything. Many days she felt ill before school. Sometimes she’d throw up, other times she’d stay home. ‘It was like asking me to climb Mount Everest in high heels,’ she says. It would be three years before Faith-Ann, now 20 and a film student in Los Angeles, told her parents about the depth of her distress. She hid the marks on her torso and arms, and hid the sadness she couldn’t explain and didn’t feel was justified. On paper, she had a good life. She loved her parents and knew they’d be supportive if she asked for help. She just couldn’t bear seeing the worry on their faces. For Faith-Ann, cutting was a secret, compulsive manifestation of the depression and anxiety that she and millions of teenagers in the U.S. are struggling with. Self-harm, which some experts say is on the rise, is perhaps the most disturbing symptom of a broader psychological problem: a spectrum of angst that plagues 21<sup>st</sup> century teens.” 6.3 million teens between ages 13-18 have had an anxiety disorder in 2015 [25% of the population in that age group]. 3 million, 12 to 17 year olds have had at least one major depressive episode in the past year [12.5% of the teen population].

TCA is not immune to those statistics. The 2013 Colorado Healthy Kids Survey, the last broad comparative study in which we participated, which our school no longer takes due to concerns from the parent community, does provide useful information. The following topics are addressed: physical activity (TCA students have more), nutrition (TCA does better), safety/violence (TCA was lower than the state in every area, bullying was reported at a level about 1/3 the rest of the state), tobacco use (better than the state, but our kids smoke), alcohol use (better than the state but over 40% of HS students indicated they had drunk alcohol – with over 12% in the past 30 days), marijuana (one fourth of the state total, but over 8% said they

had used), other drugs (well below the state averages in every area of drug use – but for one, prescription drugs – right at 12% of TCA students reported getting into parents medicine cabinets versus 13.6% for the state), mental health - sad, hopeless, considered or attempted suicide (less than state averages but almost 7% stated they had seriously considered suicide). These numbers remind us of the three cabinets Dr. Poland advised parents to make sure were locked – the gun cabinet, the liquor cabinet, and the medicine cabinet. Although the rates for TCA, in most all measures were very positive in a comparative sense – we do deal with the same issues. And now suicide on a greater scale.

After looking at the results mentioned above – before there was ever a suicide at TCA the leadership at TCA traditional HS brought to the board the proposal in late 2013 to add a *Health and Wellness* course as an elective to the curriculum, with the future potential of making it a required graduation course. We addressed the course again in late 2014/early 2015, stating that we would continue it as an elective at that point in time – with the likelihood of revisiting in the future. TCA lost our first student in December 2015, and several more since then. The background and specifics of the course, that has been approved twice by the TCA board, is provided in your read-aheads. It does not cover sex-education and is a mirror of the course that has been taught and approved by the board as a graduation requirement at College Pathways since its doors were first opened nearly a decade ago.

At the first meeting of the Task Force, the group stressed some common themes – providing coping and resiliency skills for students, increasing health and wellness focus, empowering parents, and a K-12 perspective. As part of the process of examining efforts to help us in dealing with this situation we looked at suicide prevention programs, anti-bullying efforts, current course offerings, outside offers of help, and connection to our core values and philosophy.

I would like to take a moment to address the Core Values and philosophical component of this discussion. I will use statements directly from the Core Values document.

- On page two of the Core Values document it states in our Missions Statement: **The Classical Academy exists to assist parents in their mission to develop exemplary citizens . . .** (the document then goes on to define the parameters of that assistance and what is meant by "exemplary citizen")
- We believe that all students should be educated in a way that equips them to be exemplary citizens.
- We value an education that recognizes man as spirit, mind, and body.
- We value a staff that recognizes the honor, gravity, and responsibility that has been entrusted to them by parents and respects the domain of the home in areas such as sex education and religious upbringing.
- Education is a Discipline where children acquire authentic character and freedom by learning healthy habits of spirit, mind, and body formed thoughtfully and responsibly.
- Education is the Science of Relationships where the teachers masterfully facilitate and support healthy beneficial relationships between the child and home (parents, siblings, extended family), teachers and other school staff, and other children.
- We respect family values, faith/religion, and time. We defer to parents for sex education of children. We let kids be kids longer.
- We provide a well-rounded education including College Prep high school graduation requirements (Core subjects of English/Literature, Foreign Language, Math, Science, History, and Social Sciences along with philosophically appropriate electives)
- Throughout his or her life, the exemplary citizen seeks to produce fruitful work by: nurturing a Spirit which is: "hungry" for what is true, beautiful, and good; hopeful and optimistic; capable of handling emotional distress.
- Continually feeding a Mind which is: able to recognize life-giving ideas.
- and caring for the physical needs of his or her Body through doing the "musts" in one's life such as: good nutrition, regular exercise, other healthy habits.

For me, I must be honest, there is much in the Core Values that speaks directly to what we should be doing to help develop the exemplary citizen and there are many health and well-being components that reflect upon that fact. The Task Force agreed in making this proposal to give us the opportunity to reach out to every student with those "musts" of life for a healthy citizenry.

That leads me to my final points. Why not just an elective? Over the three years of the elective offering, not one of the students that has taken their life has opted to take the class. And during those three years only one student that is on the leadership's list of concerned students has taken the course. We cannot just hope that students hear about the help that is available for them, to hope that they hear about coping and resiliency skills, and healthy lifestyle skills

they could learn in this course. We all hope these topics take place in the home – and encourage that, but that is not the case for many families.

And concerning electives:

To graduate a student needs 48 credits (which in our new proposal would include 8 electives). Every student can schedule for 7 class periods each semester for the 8 total semesters in high school – or 56 possible credit opportunities.

So, in reality a student can graduate with 48 credits and one study hall each semester of high school. OR, if they took no study halls, they could theoretically have the 40 core credit requirements + the 8 electives, which equals 48 credits to graduate PLUS the opportunity for 8 additional electives or 16 total electives, if no study halls are taken. Now, seniors do have the opportunity for partial absences (so you could theoretically lower that number by 2 overall). The fact remains elective opportunities are much greater than 8 as proposed, or the 9 currently available.

FINALLY, the statistics on the actual average number of credits a student graduates with at TCA, for the last two graduating classes is 52 (so that would equate to in actuality, 12 overall elective opportunities for the average student).

Back to where I began. This is a difficult and challenging subject. The board has asked for an update on the Task Force and how you can help. In the recommendations section of the read-ahead I concluded:

Suicide is a complicated topic with many contributing factors as outlined by Dr. Poland and other experts in this area. There are no guarantees of success – that we will not experience another suicide – with any program or engagement strategy. But we must diligently strive for that end. At this time, the Director of Academic Services and Task Force recommend and request the following of the TCA Board:

1. **Approve** the accepted *Health and Wellness* elective transitioning to a mandatory Physical Education course and graduation requirement.
2. **Support** the Task Force recommendation to incorporate the *Signs of Suicide (SOS)* program, as recommended by Dr. Scott Poland and utilized by District 20 and other school districts across the country at TCA Secondary in 2017-2018.
3. **Support** the Task Force and Secondary Leadership Team recommendation to utilize the seven question SOS student survey before this school year ends with our secondary students. Parents will be allowed to opt-out their child.

4. **Be aware** that staffing requests may entail an increase of up to 3.3 FTE for next school year.
5. **Support** the TCA leadership team with the parent community when questions arise about the efforts being undertaken.
6. **Understand** that work continues through the Task Force on the elementary component (bridge to secondary), the bullying piece, parent academy opportunities, ongoing student engagement, and staffing needs.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sean Shields and Blake Galvin (both Task Force members), Nikki Upchurch (who has taught the course at CP), and I are all available for any questions that you may have.