



CHAC (Community Health Awareness Council)

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PRESS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

On the frontlines with crayons, paints and an irresistible weekly invitation to engage imaginations and explore feelings through color and marks, local therapists are supporting student mental wellbeing and a healthy school kickoff for twelve hundred second and fourth graders

Twelve hundred second and fourth graders across Mountain View Whisman School District's (MVWSD's) nine campuses are currently learning how the process of making art and creative choices can help bring more ease and joy to their transition back to school, inspire curiosity, and deepen connections to classmates.

The arts-based *BackTogether!* program is an engaging mental health prevention program first delivered to local students, at scale, in 2021 by local mental health leader and non-profit CHAC (Community Health Awareness Council). The program was created to address pandemic-related student anxiety, social connection challenges, and respond to the U.S. Surgeon General's call for increased access to youth mental health prevention. The current *BackTogether!* program at MVWSD runs August 22 – September 16th.

The common refrain from student participants after day one of the MVWSD program: "Why only four weeks? This is working! Don't stop!"

The CHAC|arts flagship program, *BackTogether!*, has supported 5,000 local elementary, middle and high school students in the Los Altos, Sunnyvale and Mountain View school districts since 2021. The Los Altos School District Fall 2021 *BackTogether!* student survey responses from the 3400 participants, grades TK – 8th, indicated 70% of students felt

very, or extremely relaxed in the arts-based sessions; 67% of students felt very, extremely engaged; and 75% of students were interested in more *BackTogether!*.

CHAC|arts curriculums integrate process-focused arts and social emotional learning (SEL) principles - it is not therapy, nor art instruction. The focus is on prevention and helping students build social and emotional skills in support of positive identity development, reduced emotional distress and positive peer relations.

One student commented, "It made me feel less stressed and let me forget about anger and sadness." Another commented, "I learned something new about my friends by what they drew."

Karin Jinbo, Director of Student Support Services and Special Education at MVWSD, said a differentiating factor in selecting the CHAC|arts *BackTogether!* program was the long-standing mental health partnership with CHAC, and the program's fit with MVWSD's Strategic Plan goal focusing on student social emotional health. The *BackTogether!* program is just one of many implementation projects the district is initiating across all grade levels. "The CHAC|arts approach aligns with our goal to increase student access to mental wellbeing tools and SEL skills building," Jinbo said.

Carol Mellberg, LMFT, ATR, and longtime frontline youth mental health advocate, created and directs the *BackTogether!* program, and leads the broader CHAC|arts mental health prevention program. Mellberg has two priorities to support CHAC|arts' evolution: 1) create deeper alignment of CHAC|arts' impact with school districts' social emotional learning goals through development of evidence-based metrics; and 2) expand a successful Spring 2022 CHAC|arts pilot program for high schoolers into the broader MVLA high school system.

Mellberg's second CHAC|arts program, *Empowered Transitions*, addresses the unique mental health challenges of our communities' teens. Mellberg shared that as a result of the pandemic, our high school seniors and juniors have spent a big chunk of their formative years isolated from friends and in fractured learning environments. Mellberg references a recent CDC Report that indicates nearly 40% of teens reported persistently feeling sad or hopeless during these times.

But the report also noted that young people have shown grace and resilience. "This is exactly how CHAC|arts helps our kids and teens – intentional, prompt-driven and feelings-based arts exercises that focus on process not product. This helps heal anxieties while sparking innate capacities for growth, joy and re-connection," Mellberg said.

The Spring 2022 Middle College CHAC|arts *Empowered Transitions* pilot program, delivered by Mellberg to a class of 30 high schoolers, not only received high fives from the seniors and juniors, but motivated them to put down their phones for the 45-minute

sessions, in exchange for crayons and paints and an opportunity to make their marks on paper.

“This is awesome!” one Middle College participant exclaimed to Mellberg, after signing a mixed media work he titled: *Unhinged Joy*.

And, the teachers’ in-class observations at Middle College? “We’ve never seen anything like this – this movement to a whole class calm, and happy immersion in such a short time,” said Middle College teacher, Tricia Langdon.

CHAC Executive Director, Marsha Deslauriers, stated that CHAC is well structured to innovate prevention programs and respond to the rising youth mental health needs, as outlined in the recent May 2022 Study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The study found that between 2016 and 2020, for our children and youth ages 3 – 17, anxiety increased 29% and depression increased 27%. “The U.S. Surgeon General has called for three things,” Deslauriers said, “expanded access to mental health care, an increase in mental health counselors in schools, and an increased investment in social-emotional learning curricula in schools. CHAC’s new mental health prevention programs, that integrate SEL best practices and CHAC|arts, address all three of these calls to action,” Deslauriers emphasized.

About CHAC (Community Health Awareness Council)

CHAC is a Silicon Valley-based non-profit mental health agency with 50 years of frontline leadership serving all ages with a whole community, continuum of care model that integrates school-based mental health, individual and family counseling, culturally responsive and self-help mental health programs. With a current staff of 100+ mental health professionals, CHAC is anchored by a highly engaged Board of Directors and talented, dedicated staff. Through the generosity of local cities, school districts, foundations, local corporations and many generous individual donors, CHAC can continue its critical role in serving the mental health needs of our community and schools at these critical times.

Join as a CHAC|arts partner. To help our youth restore and grow healthy connections to self, others and their bright futures through arts-based mental health prevention programs, contact: Carol Mellberg, LMFT, ATR, CHAC|arts Director, cmellberg@chacmv.org.

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