

Conejo Valley Unified School District Community Views on Implementing School-Based

Mental Health Checks

AP Research

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the current state of mental health issues within the Conejo Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) and to reveal what current methods exist in order to help students struggling with issues such as stress and anxiety. The study evaluates the community's views of implementing school-based mental health checks and whether this is something students, parents, and school administrators would advocate for. To discover this information, surveys were administered to students and parents to conclude if these teenagers are experiencing mental health issues and what their thoughts are regarding school-based psychological checks. In addition to surveys, interviews were also conducted among counselors and assistant principals of instruction (APIs) from the CVUSD comprehensive high schools regarding similar topics as the surveys. Results showed mental health issues are indeed prevalent among students in the CVUSD and both students and parents alike would support the implementation of a mental health program. Likewise, counselors and APIs supported the program, but also mentioned possible limitations regarding these checks such as finance and the validity of students' responses in their questionnaires. These results do match the study's hypothesis and ultimately contribute to the academic conversation of the necessity and feasibility of implementing school-based mental health checks on a smaller scale in a suburban high school community.

### **Introduction**

Considering the amount of pressure academically and socially experienced by high school students, complications such as anxiety and stress remain quite prevalent in society. This typically develops during adolescence and continues into adulthood. Despite this, adolescents experiencing these problems have few outlets to reach out to, thus resulting in the early signs of mental health disorders often being overlooked (Allen & McGuire, 2011). Adolescents typically receive regular physical check ups, yet rarely undergo mental health checks to evaluate their psychological stability. An ideal area for a mental health outlet to exist would be within the school systems, considering a majority of a student's time is spent there. These checks would ask teens questions regarding their current emotional state based on the Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) which would then be analyzed by counselors or school psychologists in order to seek out struggling students (Chorpita, Ebesutani, & Higa-McMillan, 2011). The RCADS is composed of statements such as "I worry about things" or "I feel sad and empty" which are designed to target early signs of anxiety or depression in adolescents. In short, with the use of early detection through a school-based program such as this, the effect of mental health on an adolescent's life could be discovered and aided.

This study does not seek to push towards the implementation of school-based mental wellness checks, it strives to study the feasibility of doing so and the opinions of the Conejo Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) community surrounding this proposition. Suggesting new programs into school districts presents obstacles considering there are several steps a program must undergo to be cleared. However, the process begins with developing a better understanding through systematic research of the community's views about this new program

which can be used as support for installation later on. To achieve these kind of results, one must survey and interview community members about the topic to analyze their views and determine if this is something they would support. Overall, this is a two step study designed to target the need for mental health checks as well as to study the feasibility of implementation.

### **Literature Review**

Several studies have been conducted exploring the efficacy and necessity for mental health checks considering the prevalence of stress and anxiety among adolescents. For example, one study reports that one in five students will have faced some form of a mental health issue before they turn eighteen and many adults who identify with these issues trace their first experiences back to their adolescence (Shirk & Jungbluth, 2008). Additionally, another study revealed that one in ten students express they experience mental health issues impairing their work in school (Allen and McGuire, 2011). Clearly, a multitude of teens deal with some form of mental stressors and when this goes undetected, it can affect their current education as well as carry into their future endeavors such as college. The prevalence of psychological instability in college students varies from as low as 2% to as high as 50% which can be attributed to modern day universities possessing even more academic demands than in the past decade (Bhujade, 2017). Since these psychological issues seem to impact a majority of students and their futures, this project strives to determine if these facts hold true for teens within the CVUSD and whether mental wellness checks are necessary in the community.

One step required for administering mental wellness questionnaires is to assure counselors are being utilized to aid students both academically and mentally, rather than solely working with administrative duties. Results of one study demonstrated that counselors wished

for their roles to focus less on administrative tasks and paperwork and more on helping students with their psychological problems (Mau, Li, & Hoetmer, 2016). Achieving this modification provides children with the mental support they need and allows counselors to have more time to provide this kind of assistance, which would in turn help prevent future issues. With this change, it becomes more feasible for school-based mental wellness checks to be implemented; however, this depends upon the degree of advocacy CVUSD administrators have for the transformation of counselors' roles.

Furthermore, several studies stress the importance of detecting these psychological problems early as they are easiest to resolve at a younger age, prior to becoming long term disorders. Early identification is a successful strategy for reducing the severity of problems and preventing these issues from turning into a severe disorder requiring a more serious measure of treatment in the future (Fox, Halpern, & Forsyth, 2008). Although early detection presents beneficial possibilities, 80% of children exhibiting mental health problems do not receive the emotional help they require (Allen & McGuire, 2011). Some studies even suggest implementing mental health screenings into pediatric practice to achieve early detection. Approximately 2% of adolescents are seen by mental health professionals each year, whereas 75% are treated in pediatric settings for their physical well-being (Husky, Miller, McGuire, Flynn, & Olfson, 2010). If mental wellness checks were initiated into children's regular physical check ups, this would create a better balance between those seen by mental health professionals and those not. However, this may be a difficult proposal considering it involves implementation on a large scale. Therefore, this project studies the alternate option of instilling these mental health screenings into schools instead.

The final type of literature relating to this topic is the strategy behind feasibility studies and the kind of data one must collect. The key steps to a successful feasibility study include researching community views, the demand for the proposal at question, practicality, and what would need to be altered in order for the instillation to occur (Bowen, Kreuter, Spring, Linnan, et al, 2009). To achieve these steps, this study will interview and survey CVUSD community members to determine their opinions surrounding mental health screenings and whether they find psychological wellness to be a prevalent issue. This project adds value to the existing literature because it demonstrates how the feasibility of this type of program may vary among different environments, and since this program has not been considered for the CVUSD, there is no research specific to the exact question.

### **Participants and Methods**

To explore the community views of the implementation of mental wellness questionnaires among students in the CVUSD, surveys and interviews were the primary source of data collection. The subjects consist of a mix of college preparatory (CP) and honors/advanced placement (AP) students, parents, assistant principals of instruction (APIs), and counselors. The inclusion criteria consisted of only members from the comprehensive high schools of the CVUSD, which include Newbury Park, Thousand Oaks, and Westlake. These subjects were selected because it is adamant for this feasibility study to receive results only from those who would be affected by the addition of CVUSD school-based mental health checks. This then excluded the non-comprehensive CVUSD high schools, Century Academy and Conejo Valley, because many of the students at these schools only attend classes on select days, therefore making it difficult to find a time where the student body could be surveyed.

### **Survey Methods**

The student surveying process was completed by visiting the classes, administering parent consent forms, and returning later to provide those who returned consent forms with the link to the survey. Students from each grade and each high school were surveyed, resulting in 250 total responses. In addition, CVUSD parents were surveyed through a link provided on the parent consent form which added 100 more results. Student surveys focused on discovering student's stress levels and how frequently they seek help when they do experience stress or anxiety (See Appendix A). Similarly, the parent surveys asked the same questions, however they were altered to ask about their child/children's stress and anxiety levels (See Appendix B). Students and parents were then both surveyed about their extent of agreeance in regards to implementing school-based mental health checks and whether they believe mental health is as important as physical health. Although there are several types of emotional issues, this experiment focuses only on stress and anxiety in order to ask questions that are not overly invasive and pertain to topics subjects feel comfortable disclosing to the study.

### **Interview Methods**

Interviews sought information from APIs and counselors from each comprehensive CVUSD high school, totaling five interviews. The interview questions written for the APIs were focused towards learning about the stress and anxiety levels of their student body and what programs or resources the school offered to combat these issues. A follow-up question in response to these answers was to inquire what data sources or indicators they use to discover these struggling teens. From this, one can discern what kind of academic or behavioral trends

exist among students who experience these issues, and if this was not inferred in their response, then the question was asked directly.

Furthermore, after establishing the frameworks surrounding these issues in their school, APIs were asked about their opinions regarding the implementation of a questionnaire in order to evaluate a student's state of mental wellness and whether or not they believe this would be beneficial for the adolescents at their high school. In addition to this, APIs were asked, hypothetically, if they would be willing to advocate for more resources such as additional counselors and on-campus psychologists to administer and evaluate the questionnaires. Counselors were also questioned and received relatively the same interview as the APIs, however their last question instead asked if they would be willing to allocate more of their time towards analyzing these questionnaires as opposed to administrative tasks. Overall, the interviews were designed to seek information regarding the stress and anxiety levels of the students at each high school and to probe APIs' and counselors' opinions about the inclusion of mental health checks.

Once all the research was conducted, the survey results were analyzed through an Excel Spreadsheet in order to view the results in a beneficial way that displayed different survey answer combinations. The interview results were then transcribed and compared in correspondence to those of the surveys to see the comparisons between the two and determine whether or not the answers reflected the same main conclusion.

### **Survey Results**

A key component to a feasibility study is to ensure the research represents an array of perspectives, specifically those who will be affected by the hypothetical outcome. For this



reason, this specific study sought to survey both students and parents within the comprehensive high schools of the CVUSD. Of the 250 students surveyed, the participants varied across enrollment in the different high schools, as well as in different grades. Similarly, the 100 parent survey results were scattered amongst parents of children enrolled in various CVUSD high schools. There were no specific questions pertaining to the students' grade or which high school they attended, however the survey was administered to a variety of students and parents from each high school in order to obtain a widespread span of results.

As anticipated, stress and anxiety proved to occur quite frequently within a high schooler's life. Out of the 250 surveyors, 64.8% reported experiencing stress or anxiety always or very often; however, of these 162 students, 67.9% revealed they rarely or never seek help. In a striking contrast, only 10.4% of the 250 respondents said they rarely or never experienced stress or anxiety, while the remaining 24.8% stated they are stressed or anxious only sometimes.

In addition to the frequency in which students endure stress or anxiety and how often they reach out to others, surveyors were also questioned on the extent to which they agree or disagree with two statements. The first statement being, "Mental health is equally as important as physical health" to which a resounding 95.2% of respondents replied they either agree or strongly agree with that statement. The following assertion stated, "Students could benefit from a program that discovers and helps students who are struggling with stress, anxiety, etc." to which 87.2% of the 250 teens reported they either agree or strongly agree with that opinion.

Due to the nature of this study, parents of students enrolled in CVUSD high schools were also surveyed, in which there were 100 participants. The parent survey asked similar questions to those of the student survey, however it was altered in which now the parent had to reply with the

frequency in which they believe their child experiences stress or anxiety and how often they believe they seek help. In response to the first question regarding the prevalence of anxiety or stress experienced by their child, 45% presumed these issues occur always or very often in their teen's life, and 48.8% of those 45 parents then went on to state their child rarely or never seeks help for it.

Parents were also surveyed in regards to their agreement with the statements in the student survey, but an additional assertion was added to suit the change in respondents which stated, "I would advocate for this type of program/questionnaire for my child". In regard to the first two statements, 99% either agreed or strongly agreed with the belief that mental health is equally as important as physical health, and 97% either agreed or strongly agreed that a mental health questionnaire could be beneficial for struggling students. With the addition of the final statement, 93% of the parents replied stating they either agreed or strongly agreed with advocating for this type of program for their own child. Of these 93 parents, 48.9% answered the first question by revealing their child is stressed or anxious often, yet rarely or never pursues support.

### **Interview Results**

Studying the feasibility of mental health checks must not only include student and parent opinions, but must also coincide with the concerns of administration members who would need to advocate for implementation before any changes can be made. Therefore, to conclude the findings and to seek a wider range of perspectives, this study additionally includes interviews amongst the APIs, as well as counselors from Newbury Park, Thousand Oaks, and Westlake. The

interviews were relatively the same for both the APIs and the counselors, but slight changes were made to better suit the interviewee.

Interviews amongst the APIs presented relatively the same conclusions as they all had similar thoughts surrounding the topic of mental health as well as the potential addition of mental health screenings. The first API interviewed was Mrs. Danielle Oliveri of Thousand Oaks High School. In regards to the first question about the pervasiveness of emotional instability at her specific high school, she believes the amount of students who are struggling is “increasing as far as anxiety, stress, and depression goes.” She then reveals that other than students visiting counselors on their own, these struggling teens are identified mostly through grades and attendance. After identifying those who are experiencing mental adversities, Oliveri states that Thousand Oaks offers “student study teams, counselors, intern therapists, and Breakthrough” which are all resources aimed to support and guide struggling students. Breakthrough is a program recently introduced by the CVUSD in order to provide extensive help for students experiencing emotional instability or struggling with drug abuse by conducting family meetings and in-depth therapy sessions. Furthermore, in regards to her opinions on the addition of school-based mental health checks, she believes this is “a great idea,” but expresses concerns about how “sometimes kids won’t take this seriously” and that money must be allocated by the district. Overall, she states she would “absolutely” advocate for mental wellness checks if the money was provided for it.

The next API interviewed was from Westlake High School who preferred to remain unnamed. At her specific high school, she believes about “10-15% of students” are affected by mental health issues, but it “feels like a lot” because there are only 5 adults, including herself

dealing with these students. In regards to targeting struggling adolescents, she states her staff has all had training on signs to look for such as if “a student is not coming to school, a sudden drop in grades, or if they are significantly tired,” but she also states that it “all depends on how a student manifests their symptoms”. She explains Westlake contains “three levels of intervention to cater to the different levels of need of each student.” The first level is the counseling staff, followed by a mental wellness counselor from a local university, with the last tier being Breakthrough. She believes most of her students can be helped through the first and second levels of intervention, but she thinks she could “service even more students” if Westlake had more mental wellness counselors. Furthermore, concerning her opinions on the hypothetical addition of emotional checks, she would advocate for them if Westlake had the money and resources to do so, but she would also worry about the “validity” of students’ answers and she would like to know what would be done with the information collected after students are surveyed.

The final API interviewed was Mr. Bennett Wutkee of Newbury Park High School. He expressed that at his particular school, they deal with a mental health issue “almost everyday” and that in his 9 years of being in the administration, “it’s crazy how much more of a need there is for it.” He then presented the perspective that mental health is hard to target because it is “so personal” and “everyone manifests their mental health in a different way.” He goes on to reveal that Newbury Park discovers struggling students mostly through “something that a student expressed verbally or through writing,” but “mental health is so tricky” therefore it is difficult to identify these students solely through grades or attendance. Once these teens are targeted, Wutkee utilizes counselors, but even he believes that they are more adept at “helping kids get

into college rather than administering day-to-day therapy for students.” In addition to counselors, he also mentions the use of the program Breakthrough and the aid of an intern from a local college which both provide students with support depending on their needs. Ultimately, when asked about his views on mental health checks, Wutkee expressed similar concerns as Oliveri and Westlake’s API regarding the “sincerity of students’ answers,” but he still believes that if Newbury had the budget for it, then he “would love more support” and would be “willing to put money there to provide that”.

Lastly, the interview portion of the results concludes with a summary of the findings from interviews of two counselors at Newbury Park High School, Mrs. Coleman and Mrs. Aggazzotti. Coleman revealed mental health is a prevalent issue at Newbury Park as she states students come in “at least daily” seeking help. Aggazzotti goes on to explain that, in general, students come forward themselves, but sometimes a parent, teacher, or friend will bring a specific student to her attention and ask that they get called in. Once these adolescents are found, Coleman states that Newbury is equipped with counselors such as herself as well as district interns who can “spend more time with the students” and “delve into deeper issues” in order to come up with coping mechanisms or strategies to help them. She also mentions that they write referrals to Breakthrough as mentioned by the APIs at the other CVUSD high schools. Furthermore, Aggazzotti believes mental health checks would be “very beneficial” and Coleman agrees as she thinks data analysis is “always helpful”. Both Aggazzotti and Coleman stated they would be “more than willing” to allocate more of their time towards analyzing these hypothetical questionnaires.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study included completing a two step process. The first step was to evaluate the need for school-based mental health checks based on the current state of stress and anxiety amongst the students in the CVUSD. This was then followed by determining whether or not these checks would be supported by different members within the community and what kind of limitations exist. Overall, the survey and interview results supported the study's hypothesis that mental health is a pervasive issue and, for the most part, students, parents, and administrative members would advocate for mental health screenings being incorporated into their district.

### **Survey Findings**

Student survey results ultimately showed that even when adolescents are experiencing stress or anxiety often, a large percentage of them will not seek help on their own, thus causing these struggling students to be overlooked within the Conejo Valley school system. Despite this, several of these students still believe mental health is equally as important as physical health, but perhaps they are unaware of how to cope with their emotional issues. As seen in the results, a large percentage of the students thought school-based mental health checks could be beneficial, especially those whose answers displayed they experience stress or anxiety often. Based off of this, the CVUSD student body demonstrates a clear need and could benefit from the implementation of mental health questionnaires which matches the findings of prior research conducted regarding the necessity of some form of a mental health program.

Parent surveys displayed similar results, however their answers in regards to how often they think their child experiences stress or anxiety did not quite match the responses of the

students themselves. Most parents responded stating they believe their child is stressed or anxious only sometimes whereas many students responded stating they experience these issues always or very often. Likewise, parents also believed their children were seeking help more often than the students reported they actually do. Teens may not always relay their issues to their parents, resulting in several parents being unaware of their child's struggles which contributes to the overall problem of emotional instability going unnoticed. This same dynamic was displayed in multiple studies in which they found parents commonly underestimate their children's emotional problems due to a lack of parent-child communication (Michels, Vanaelst, Stoppie, et al, 2013; Salbach-Andrae, Lenz, & Lehmkuhl, 2009). Furthermore, parent results showed they do find mental health to be as important as physical health and a vast majority stated they believe mental health checks would be beneficial therefore they would advocate for this type of program for their child. Aside from the misconnection between students and parents regarding their child's level of stress, the student and parent surveys generally provided the same conclusion that mental health checks are needed within the CVUSD and that both students and parents think they would be helpful for their adolescents' overall well being.

### **Interview Findings**

The interview responses also seemed to be quite similar which allowed conclusions to be drawn more easily as there were not many variances across the high schools. All of the APIs and counselors revealed they do find mental health issues to be somewhat or very prominent in their particular high school which further supports the results from the surveys. Additionally, they all responded saying a majority of these students are discovered through monitoring grades and attendance or by parents or teachers bringing attention to a particular student. There are,

however, a good amount of teens who will seek help on their own and visit counselors which is a major way administration finds adolescents who need help. Once these students are discovered, the high schools reported having similar ways of helping them which includes counselors, mental health professionals, and the extensive program called Breakthrough. Although the high schools have several resources to aid struggling students, none of the schools reported saying they have any programs to discover them. They wait for the issues to present themselves, which, again, causes many suffering adolescents to be overlooked and not receive the help they require.

Although the CVUSD does not currently have any programs to discover students with mental health issues, interview results suggest that administrative members do support the concept of that type of resource. All of the APIs as well as the counselors believe this would be beneficial for their student body and they would advocate for it's instillation into their high school. Furthermore, based on their expertise regarding student-survey interactions as well as the obstacles a program must overcome to be included, APIs did voice potential setbacks of the program such as the lack of funding and the validity of students' responses in the questionnaires. Despite these possible shortcomings, APIs were still positive because they think the program's overall purpose is beneficial. In addition to the support of the APIs, counselors also revealed their willingness to advocate for these screenings as they stated they would be willing to allocate more of their time towards analyzing questionnaires. Ultimately, interviews displayed that administrative members are on board for mental health checks and led into the idea that the next step to determining the feasibility of implementation would be to speak with the Conejo Valley district leaders in regards to their thoughts about the whole program, but more specifically about the financial side since that seems to be a major restraint.



### **Limitations**

The primary shortcoming within this project was finding subjects to survey as well as to interview. Originally, the method for recruiting participants was to survey english classes because these courses consist only of students from one grade level which would ensure an even amount of results from each grade and school. However, finding teachers who were willing to allow their class to be surveyed was difficult and the parent consent forms introduced an additional obstacle because not everyone returned one, further reducing the subject pool. As a result, the amount of survey responses were not as high and the participants were not as scattered amongst the different high schools as anticipated because it was easier to receive results at some schools rather than others. Likewise, it was even more challenging to find parents to survey because they are harder to reach which contributed to the low number of results and variety of schools.

It was also difficult to get in contact with administrative members to interview considering they are very busy especially at the time of year this study was conducted which was during registration. The study wished to include interviews from the high school administrators as well as district leaders, but the district members were hard to reach and the administrators were not always available. It was especially difficult to find a time to interview counselors during registration which explains why the study only includes interviews of counselors from Newbury Park High School because they had not yet begun that process yet. Overall, the major limitations of this project were due to the inability to reach a large amount and variety of participants which ultimately weakened the idea of including every CVUSD perspective in this feasibility study.

Lastly, since this study only focused on stress and anxiety, it does not fully represent the CVUSD's emotional health needs. Although the student and parent surveys were anonymous, they were still written to be noninvasive and to touch on topics people felt comfortable sharing about. As a result, major mental health issues such as depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse were not covered. This limits the amount of the project's findings, but does not weaken the results discovered regarding stress and anxiety. Ultimately, a more inclusive study should be conducted in addition to this one in order to include research surrounding more mental health problems.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

In summary, since this program has not been considered for the CVUSD, this project adds value to the academic conversation because it demonstrates how the feasibility of mental health screenings can vary among different communities. Despite setbacks, the study was still able to gather useful information to conclude that mental wellness checks are necessary and could be beneficial for high school students within the CVUSD. It also found that students, parents, APIs, and counselors alike believe these checks could be advantageous for their high school and they would advocate for implementation if this were to ever occur. Although this study does not fully answer the question as to whether or not this is entirely feasible for the CVUSD, it does introduce potential drawbacks and successfully provides insight into the community views surrounding the concept. To further this research, the next step would be speaking with the district leaders of the CVUSD to see what their opinions are regarding the questionnaires and what kind of process this program would have to undergo in order to be included. Ultimately, this project found that mental health issues such as stress and anxiety are

indeed prevalent within the CVUSD, and that students, parents, and community members alike would support the idea of implementing some type of emotional support system into their community.

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## Appendix A

### Student Survey

Please answer the questions below and respond with the frequency in which you experience the situations given.

1. How often do you experience stress/anxiety from any cause? (ie: school, sports, family, etc)

Always                  Very Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

2. If you do experience stress, anxiety, how often do you seek help from parents or school counselors?

Always                  Very Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

Please read the statements below and answer based on the degree you agree or disagree.

1. Mental health is as important as physical health.

Strongly Agree                  Agree                  Disagree                  Strongly Disagree

2. Students could benefit from a program that discovers and helps students who are struggling with stress, anxiety, etc.

Strongly Agree                  Agree                  Disagree                  Strongly Disagree

## Appendix B

### Parent Survey

Please answer the questions below and respond with the frequency in which you experience the situations given.

1. To your knowledge, how often do you think your child experiences stress/anxiety from any cause? (ie: school, sports, family, etc)

Always                  Very Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

2. If they do experience stress, anxiety, how often do they seek help from parents or school counselors?

Always                  Very Often                  Sometimes                  Rarely                  Never

Please read the statements below and answer based on the degree you agree or disagree.

1. Mental health is as important as physical health.

Strongly Agree          Agree                  Disagree                  Strongly Disagree

2. Students could benefit from a program that discovers and helps students who are struggling with stress, anxiety, etc.

Strongly Agree          Agree                  Disagree                  Strongly Disagree

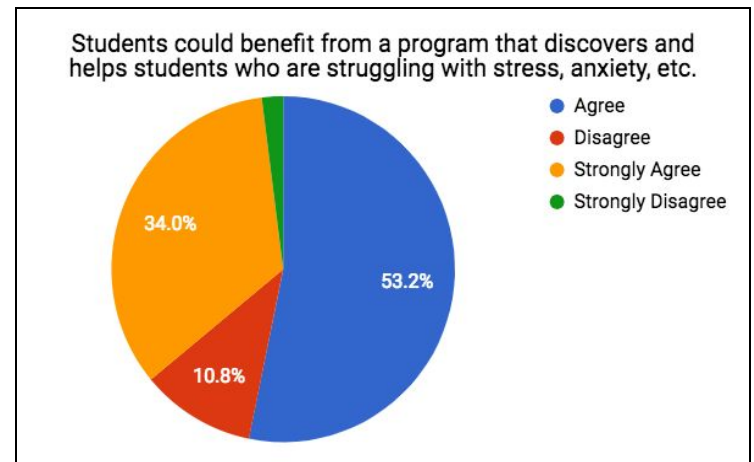
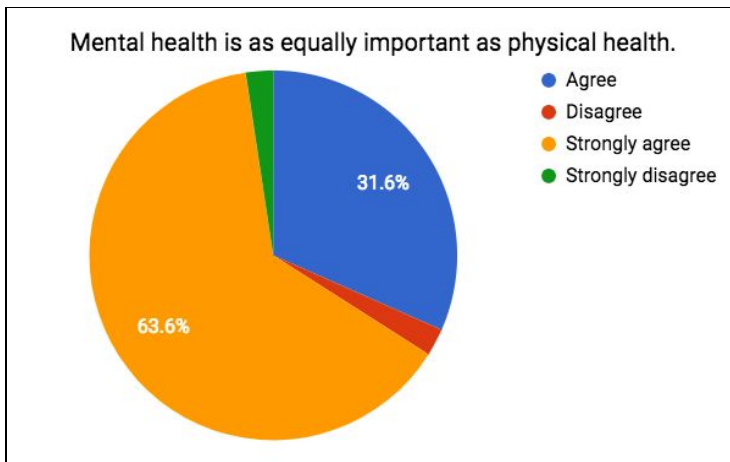
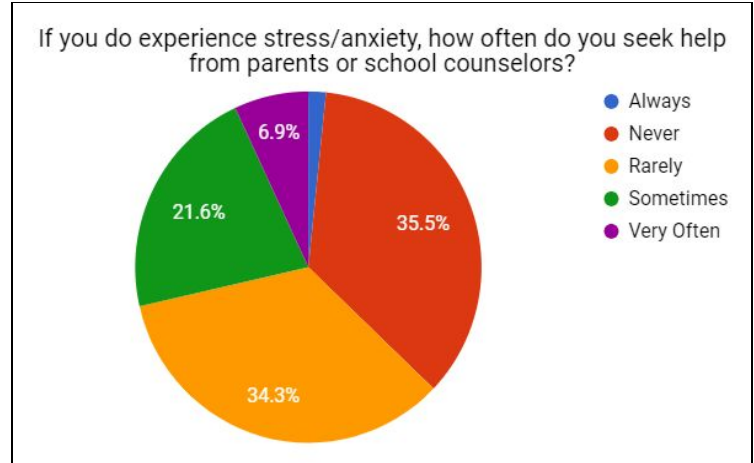
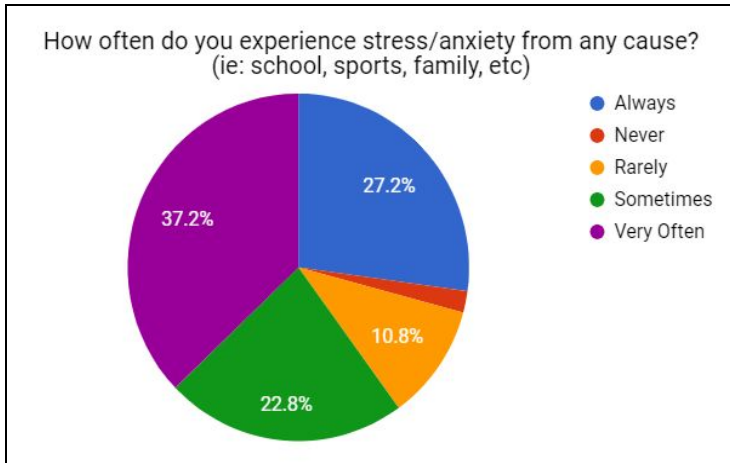
3. I would advocate for this type of program/questionnaire for my child.

Strongly Agree          Agree                  Disagree                  Strongly Disagree



Appendix C

**Student Survey Data**



Appendix D

Parent Survey Data

