

Testimony to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP)

Joshua J. Garcia (Josh), Ed. D., Superintendent, Tacoma School District #10

June 8, 2023

Good morning, Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy and Members of the Committee.

My name is Josh Garcia, and I am the proud Superintendent of the Tacoma School District. I am honored to share the viewpoint of school superintendents for this important hearing focused on the mental health of our nation's youth and to speak with you today what we have observed, what we have been doing in Tacoma Public Schools and what we might do together to support the youth mental health crisis in America.

What do we want for every child in America? A simple question that has a complex and nuanced response. As one school district, we're thinking and working to take action every day. We are fully committed to each of our kids being safe, engaged, supported, healthy and challenged. We recognize mental health impacts us all, students, staff, and community. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. The need for this hearing is more critical than ever.

As we know, the human brain is developing during the K-12 experience. At the most impactful phase in human development, the lack of support and comprehensive approaches are significantly impacting our students' ability to grow their social, emotional, and academic development.

#### *1. Tacoma-*

For those that don't know our beautiful community, Tacoma WA is an urban port city that is diverse. Our Tacoma Public Schools represent more than 28,000 students representing over 170 tribes and ethnicities. Over 2,000 of our students qualify as homeless, over 55% qualify as low income, and over 15% receive special education services.

In the 2011-2012 school year, each of our high schools was labeled as drop out factory by *U.S. News and World Report*. We were in a dire state, and we needed a new approach. We started the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative, which is an intentional action plan that recognizes that students are learning 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's a recognition that focusing all our community energy on solely transforming the student experience during schools is a bad model, when schools only have students one-third of the time. We knew we had to transform schools and leverage the other two-thirds of the time to truly make gains and provide the supports necessary to reach our desired academic and mental health goals.

Fast Forward to 2022, 90.2 % of our students graduate in 4 years. 86.7% of high school students take college level classes. We have record numbers of students engaged in extra-curricular activities and athletics. This year alone over 12,000 participants in K-8 have been engaged in after school activities, STEM, fitness, arts and more. A record number of High School students are participating in paid job experiences through work-based learning and Jobs 253. Tacoma has been able to make big strides to improve student outcomes. But we know that the challenges our students are facing are only growing. Our kids are in pain – in our own homes, neighborhoods, cities, States and in our own nation. We need a united response.

## 2. *Mental Health Youth Crisis*

Everyday our students face the challenges that are ripping our great nation apart. In the last year, 10 of our students – Tony, Angel, Brielle, Isiah, Marco, DJ, Wyatt, Xavier, Larry, and Lyana – have been shot, our students have had to attempt to survive human trafficking, battle homelessness, drug abuse, physical and mental abuse, and social media harassment and bullying. If we pause and read the news, we will see that our students are like many American youth in the trauma they face daily. Although these may not be new challenges for us as a Nation, the speed of the incidents and the traumatic stress are more intense than ever.

Like you and I, our students are relentlessly being bombarded with images, news events and daily experiences of trauma and stress. Unlike you and I, they are doing this without fully developed brains, coping skills and access to preventive and therapeutic services. This repeated attack on the human brain is putting our youth on high alert, which brings us all here today.

In 2021, 72% of our 10<sup>th</sup> graders reported feeling anxious, nervous or on edge regularly (68% across the state) and 60% reported not being able to stop worrying (55% across the state).

17% of our 10<sup>th</sup> graders made a suicide plan in the last year compared to 15.6% across the State. This translates into 13,239 students in our State making a plan to commit suicide.

Unfortunately, it is hard to imagine that 10<sup>th</sup> grade kids in Washington are unique. That same data would show the number is higher in 8<sup>th</sup> grade (16.2% of 85, 819) = 13,902

## 3. How Tacoma Faces These Challenges Head On

The challenges our students and schools face are tremendous, and schools can't do this work alone! Communities, States, and our great nation need sustainable action plans that are functional, continuous, and comprehensive. We must all acknowledge our responsibility without blame. Through the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative, we have moved away from episodic events to sustainable practices across our school buildings. Our sustainable practices related to supporting whole child to improve student outcomes are focused on three elements: prevention strategies, response strategies, and therapeutic supports.

### *Prevention Strategies:*

In Tacoma we have an intentional plan to support social emotional learning defined at the local level: each of our schools has developed their own social emotional learning plan and publishes it annually to ensure feedback from families and community stakeholders.

We also make sure our students are engaged in solid physical and mental wellness supports during the school day as well as in the afterschool ecosystem. Locally we do this with Beyond the Bell and Club Beyond which serves over 12,000 participants using a shared business model, common mental health

supports, accessing community assets and aligned funding with over 70 partners. Through our shared signature strategies, we make sure students are greeted warmly, which builds a sense of belonging, and we focus on relationship building through strategies like, “circles” (building community, empathy and equitable story telling) and “emotion checks” (fostering self-regulation and understanding of others).

Our system of positive behavioral supports ensures students understand —school-wide expectations to foster stability, encourage positive expectations and outcomes and reinforce healthy mental health habits.

We also provide a safe place for students to build belonging during the evening; Tacoma has launched 12 summer sites across town where teens can belong, break bread, and have equitable access to safe environments.

#### *Responsive Strategies:*

We have invested in professional development focused on trauma sensitive practices.

We support, train, and facilitate restorative practices that bring voice with the intention of healing and understanding for all participants.

We also provide tiered supports – focusing on targeted support for some students (check in, check out) and intensive supports (students at risk of harming self or others).

#### *Therapeutic Supports:*

Using federal ESSER funding and U.S. Department of Education grants we were able to invest in therapeutic supports. –We have learned that we must build partnerships and be honest about what our schools can and can't do for our students. We have 10 healthcare partners that are providing site based mental health supports to our students to keep them engaged in school and learning alongside their peers.-

#### *How can we move forward together:*

Expanding on the lessons we have learned and successes we have had in Tacoma to date, I would encourage Congress to do the following:

1. Continue to expand on your work with Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. I know that budget decisions are difficult and there is never enough. However, it would be foolish for us all to ignore the signs are youth are sending us. If we don't invest now, our costs will be 10 times what they are now in the future. In particular, the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant and the Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration (MHSP) grants will help districts train and retain desperately needed school mental health professionals.
2. Pay for healthcare services with healthcare dollars by ensuring every district can bill Medicaid for the healthcare services delivered to Medicaid eligible students, so we can focus our local education funding on other supportive programs and services.
3. Incentivize the Health Care Industry to have formalized partnership with public schools to serve youth with Mental Health Supports. We need to bring therapeutic services to our youth and continue to find ways to support growth in the workforce.
4. Build on categorical funding opportunities like Title IV of ESEA and consider new targeted support specifically for mental health programs and services and require-states to match federal investments. This will allow smaller communities to have sustainable resources for their students.
5. Provide flexibility through the Carl Perkins Grant and Department of Labor Grants to support paid youth job experiences and required financial literacy, building a sense a hope for the future.

### *Gratitude*

Has Tacoma done everything we could, far from it! Tacoma is trying, learning, responding, and making a difference, we have evidence. We know that through engagement, tiered supports, and shared strategies, our students are being more successful dealing with their individual emotions and stresses, developing their social awareness and its impact on others. They are making responsible decisions for their future and building relationship skills. We are seeing students give back, feel seen, fostering their own sense of belonging, and working academically at all time high levels.

America's public schools and our beautifully unique communities can't respond to the mental health needs in isolation. In Tacoma, we work in partnership and that is not easy, there are egos, turf battles and frustrations. However, we recognize that we are better together, that we may not be united on everything, but our future is with us now and we must be united in our commitment to serving youth first. Personally, and professionally, I am grateful for your willingness to do more and better. I know that out of the 27,141 Washington students who reported the made a plan to commit suicide, 751 of those students are in our city. I challenge us all to know how many youth are in crisis in our own communities.

Thank you!



Dr. Joshua J. Garcia  
Superintendent  
Tacoma Public Schools

### References:

[Data Dashboard - Healthy Youth Survey \(askhys.net\)](#)

[Report Card - Washington State Report Card \(ospi.k12.wa.us\)](#)