



PALO ALTO SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Kimberly Diorio
Principal

Dear Parents and Students,

It is hard to believe the school year is coming to an end! The popular parenting quote, "*the days are long but the years are short*," comes to mind this time of year. That said, I'm heartened to see our seniors enjoying their last Paly days together, signing yearbooks on the deck, playing pick-up volleyball, listening to music and simply laughing on the quad. I know the entire staff is looking forward to next week's graduation ceremony, and we're sending best wishes to another *amazing* class of students as we celebrate this significant milestone in their educational journey. Congratulations to all the seniors (and parents) of the class of 2015! We are so proud of you!

For students and parents who will be returning to Paly next year, I'd like to take this opportunity to update you on progress we have made in our commitment to improve learning for ALL of our students. Since our WASC visit in early March, we have been working hard behind the scenes on a number of issues which have been raised, namely homework load (some students report more than 15 hours per week), "test stacking" (incidents of having 3 or more major tests on one day), and "C" days (our 7 period day). Paly teachers have been engaged in thoughtful discussions and researching best practices about these critical issues. They are constantly thinking about how to improve instruction, student engagement, and increasing empathy for the student experience. This dialogue is what inspires teachers, and it has invigorated the faculty. Through a multitude of venues, from student forums, to analyzing student survey responses over the past 18 months, and a student "fish-bowl" just last week, we hear our students, and we are ready to take action.

We used a design thinking approach to problem-solve this important issue and came up with a prototype for 2015-2016 that we believe is a step in the right direction. Here is what we've agreed upon as a school:

1. There will be no homework assigned over Thanksgiving break, Winter break, February break and Spring break next school year. (We've asked teachers to be mindful of the week before and following a holiday break so students are not overwhelmed as an unintended consequence).
2. We will continue to be flexible and create a "culture of care" at our school as the best way to address the issue of "test stacking." (We will encourage students to speak with teachers directly to discuss rescheduling options if they are feeling overwhelmed with work and/or have more than 3 tests on any given day).
3. We strongly encourage teachers to be aware of and reduce the number of tests, major projects, essays and/or summative assessments due on a "C" day and will pilot an effort next year to rethink "C" days in this regard. (Many departments will be using "C" days as "review" days or for pre-teaching purposes).

You may have also read (pending board approval) that our teachers will be using *Schoolology* more robustly next year. Improved usage across campus will help us analyze student workload as we continue to have conversations about the purpose of homework and provide evidence that we are following the district's homework policy with fidelity across departments.

We're prepared to devote all of our collaboration time next year to working on the department and the school wide action plans outlined in our recent WASC report. We will be looking for student comment along the way to measure the effectiveness of our efforts. I have every confidence that our teachers are committed to using data and to incorporating student feedback into their practice as they work together in small learning teams and help each other grow as educators.

In other exciting news, we've added two key positions to address student well-being and to support our mental health efforts. Jonathan Frecceri is the Mental Health Therapist who has been hired as our school's new "Wellness Coordinator." Jonathan will be working in a leadership capacity, along with our mental health team, to spearhead our prevention and intervention efforts. Working in partnership with Jonathan, teacher leader Josh Bloom will be transitioning to a new role where he will be responsible for leading Social Emotional Learning (SEL) across campus. Jonathan and Josh are charged with implementing *Sources of Strength*, a research based youth suicide prevention project that utilizes the power of peer social networks to change unhealthy norms and culture and ultimately prevent suicide, bullying and substance abuse. Josh will also be responsible for integrating mindfulness practices and social emotional learning lessons into classrooms and/or our advisory program. Special thanks to all of the parents who donated to Partners in Education (PiE) for making the funding available for the newly created Social Emotional Learning position.

The end of the school year is always bittersweet. We're sad that another school year is about to end, and yet we're excited about the possibilities that lie ahead. Given the challenges we've faced as a community this year, we hope the summer provides everyone the time to rest, reflect and rejuvenate. Thank you again for your continued support of our school. We love our Paly Vikes!

With Viking pride,

Kim Diorio

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Principal