

To: County Supervisors and San Diego HHSA Leadership Team
From: Rex Sheridan, SPA Clinical Director
Date: 2/23/2021
Re: Closure of San Pasqual Academy

Good afternoon. My name is Rex Sheridan and I am the clinical director at San Pasqual Academy. My intention had been to write this letter earlier this week, however, as you may imagine I have been working non-stop to help support and respond to the needs of our community in the wake of Sunday's unanticipated events. Sunday morning, after over 13 years of service to the youth at San Pasqual Academy, I received the shocking news of my community's impending closure from a Union Tribune article forwarded to me from one of my clinic staff who happened to be reading the Sunday news. This news was devastating enough and even more personally hurtful because of the careless, insensitive, and non-trauma informed way that it was delivered.

During my career in mental health and youth services, 2 decades of which has been in San Diego County, I have had contact with and worked in many different settings dedicated to meeting the needs of our most vulnerable youth populations; yet none could even remotely be compared to what is offered at SPA. This is why I have now spent a third of my life committed to and working to develop this program because of first-hand experience witnessing lives transformed, hearts opened back up after years of disconnection, wounds healed after lifetimes of abuse and trauma, siblings reunited after separation, goals reimaged out of hopelessness, skills and knowledge crafted and nurtured out of feelings of incompetence, and new identities and possibilities replacing desperation and fragmentation. And if you think that those experiences sound overstated or dramatic, then you haven't had the pleasure of attending one of our graduation ceremonies where our young adults tell these stories themselves, one of our sports games where youth are cheered for the first time in their lives, one of our talent shows where they perform an original song, or a college road trip where they get to visit universities all over the state and envision a new possibility that was never previously imagined.

It is understandable that those who have never had a personal connection, a tour, or even a conversation with members of this community could miss the big picture of what we are, or more accurately stated "who we are." What the article characterized as a struggling program is actually a vibrant community made up of diverse ages, ethnicities, faiths, gender and sexual orientations, and most importantly families. All of this uniqueness blended together with the common goals of acceptance, hope, knowledge, growth, connection, and kindness. San Pasqual Academy, in a microcosm, represents everything that San Diego County has said it is striving for. What the article called "declining enrollment" (in large part due to the lack of consistent commitment of referring parties to view SPA as an equal and in many cases even preferable option to other "resource homes" with far less resources) are actually amazing young San Diegans who have desperately sought permanency and connection and finally found it at SPA. I wish I could share their names with you so you know who they are and so their names and stories could be spoken out loud as these critical decisions about their future and their inherent value are being made.

Although I cannot share names, it is important to me to share a few real life stories from the last couple of days as we and our amazing staff have been working tirelessly to help our community both recover and persevere. Yesterday, I sat down with one of our campus health and wellness staff, a young lady who lived at SPA as a youth, graduated from SPA, and recently completed Certified Nursing Assistant program; all while raising a beautiful daughter. She has shared repeatedly the pride and self-esteem that

she gets from giving back now to the community that gave so much to her. When I spoke with her yesterday, she said simply “I know me and my daughter are going to be ok because SPA has helped me so much. But you guys are my family that I know I can always fall back on, so what’s going to happen now?”

I spoke with another young man yesterday who needed to pace and walk in a circle around me as I slowly pivoted to stay facing him while he talked. He has only been at SPA for a few months and is planning to return to a family member soon, but he has been so impacted already by the community at SPA, that he said “I know I won’t be here much longer, but I want to fight for SPA and for all the other kids because this is their home and they don’t want to go anywhere else.”

When our administrative team went into a 10th grade classroom to process the recent news with them and offer support, instead of asking first how it was going to impact them, they demonstrated their connection and internalization of this community by asking instead... “Where are the grandparents going to live, and our house parents? And what about you Tia?” (Tia is our Academy Director who was in the room at the time and who has committed her whole life to this program including moving her and her family and raising her children on campus over 15 years ago because she knew the program needed that kind of hands-on leadership)

Finally, the most common questions that we got from nearly every youth who chose to speak were “Where am I going to live now?” and “Why didn’t anyone care enough to talk to us or anyone here about decisions that change our lives?” Unfortunately, none of us had any answers to these simple and yet profound questions, and I am confident that none of those reading this have those answers either.

I share these stories to paint a picture of our community, offer a perspective of the real impact of these decisions, and to inject actual names and identities into a process that has appeared to be void or disinterested in all of these things. My hope is that those involved in these recent decisions were misinformed or did not have all the information, are willing to listen to voices that by choice or in error were not given the opportunity to be heard before, and are willing to reflect and reconsider a decision that neglects and further traumatizes our county’s most vulnerable population at their most vulnerable time when we have a duty to protect them and give them our very best. Our very best has already been designed, cultivated, and evidenced in the form of San Pasqual Academy. This special community is widely celebrated for its forward thinking, innovative, and effective approach in responding to the complex needs of our youth. Its presence over the last 20 years has served as one of this county’s greatest achievements, while its closure would be a stain on the record of all who did not do everything in their power to protect it. I respectfully ask that all possible options be explored, pursued, and exhausted and that the collaboration and teamwork that once built and sustained SPA be restored in order to preserve this invaluable community.

Sincerely,

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