

For Immediate Release:

May 27, 2020

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Mindful Life Project Partners with Pittsburg Schools to Help Navigate Stress in and out of the Virtual Classroom

Pittsburg, CA...May 27, 2020 - As teachers, students and families adapt to the ways COVID-19 is changing education, Contra Costa County's Mindful Life Project (MLP) has found a way to support their efforts. Drawing on a unique brand of culturally sensitive mindfulness training, MLP is delivering virtual workshops across California at very affordable prices or for free due to the generosity of foundations, companies and individuals.

One beneficiary is the Pittsburg Unified School District (PUSD). With support from the John Muir Community Health Fund (CHF), the Mindful Life Project was slated to deliver in-person mindfulness training to many of PUSD's students this spring. In recent years, due to mental health benefits that include the ability to help individuals reduce stress, anxiety and depression, as well as increase attention, self-awareness, and self-regulation, mindfulness has gained traction as an important educational tool.

MLP's take on mindfulness emerged when founder and executive director, JG Larochette, a former third grade teacher in Richmond, worked with his students to adapt mindfulness training in a way that captures their imagination, using everything from call and response to popular hip-hop songs with lyrics rewritten to reflect mindfulness principles. Equally important, many of MLP's trainers are young people of color, much like many of the students it serves. This includes Pittsburg, whose student population is nearly 2/3 Hispanic/Latino, with nearly three-quarters struggling economically.

But when COVID-19 hit, eliminating the possibility of face-to-face training, Larochette pivoted. He worked with PUSD's Coordinator of Social Emotional Supports, Dr. Tracy Catalde, and the CHF to offer virtual mindfulness training to every staff member, from the superintendent through custodial staff in PUSD, as well as to district families. "Teachers and families are enormously stressed as they try to adapt to online teaching," says Larochette. "Pittsburg's strong leaders already do a great job of creating social and emotional services and, together, we thought we could best serve the students by first supporting the adults in their lives during troublesome times."

As Catalde says, "By providing timely self-care tools, such as mindfulness to teachers, staff, and parents, we are all the more able to care for our students and their families. No one is immune from stress. Everyone can learn to become more resilient, thereby increasing the resiliency of our Pittsburg community. The current circumstances have simply reminded us the time for this is now!"

With that in mind, Larochette and his MLP colleagues quickly recast their curriculum for online training. Every staff member in the district, from the superintendent on down can receiving the training, as can parents, who can choose to attend sessions in English or in Spanish.

“Thank you to the John Muir Community Health Fund for providing us with this opportunity to offer mindfulness trainings to our PUSD community,” said Dr. Janet Schulze, Superintendent. “Our teachers, administrators, students, and families are all benefitting from being able to learn this practice. I appreciate how John Muir Community Health Fund quickly adapted to the reality we are facing to offer these trainings virtually. The virtual session I attended was fantastic and incredibly helpful. During this time of uncertainty, it is especially important that our PUSD community has tools to manage stress.”

In addition, dozens of students have also taken the virtual mindfulness trainings to support their mental and emotional well-being. And while moving online has its challenges, Larochette sees the way that PUSD adapted as mirroring his own belief that mindfulness training is especially relevant during this time.

“Think of the momentary technology glitches,” he says. “I’ve tried to embed in our content the understanding that mindfulness can rewire us to accept and work calmly through those glitches, just as, more broadly, it helps us navigate these very difficult times.”

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About Pittsburg Unified School District:

Video about PUSD: <https://youtu.be/X2xn3HOavfM>. Awarded the College Board’s Gaston Caperton Opportunity Honor Roll award in 2016 for expanding access to college, Pittsburg Unified School District (PUSD) is one of 130 school districts across the nation recognized for creating opportunities for traditionally underrepresented students. PUSD is a K-12 district serving the community of Pittsburg, California. Founded in 1933, the school system is committed to providing an excellent opportunity for all students to learn. Comprised of eight elementary schools, three junior high schools, one comprehensive high school, one continuation high school, an adult school, independent study options, and a preschool program, the school district serves more than 11,300 students. PUSD is located in the San Francisco Bay Area, fifty minutes outside of downtown San Francisco.

About Mindful Life Project:

Mindful Life Project helps transform schools and communities from the inside out with innovative mindfulness based social emotional learning direct service programming for students and trainings for school staff, families and more. Video of MLP: https://youtu.be/8cq_Ux-5Zu8