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Marin Voice

Unmasking students without support impacts learning

By Steve Diamond

Recently, public school districts across Marin County announced that masks are no longer required in the classroom.

As a counselor for Buckelew Programs providing mental health services for youth throughout the county, I applaud any and all efforts to help students navigate toward some form of normalcy during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, but more support is needed to ease this transition from masked to unmasked.

Let's first review some basics about human behavior.

We have been told for two years that we are living in a dangerous time, and that we must wear masks to protect our own safety and the safety of those we care about.

One of the most powerful primary emotions is fear, so fear-based situations or environments make it challenging for us to manage our emotions. Ad-

ditionally, we are social creatures by nature. We need connection.

We also crave predictability and consistency because that's what feels safe, so when we receive mixed messages, our system goes haywire. After two years of danger messages, now all of a sudden, we don't need masks. All of a sudden, it's safe. All of a sudden, we can go back into the classroom with no masks.

We've been told we can take our masks off but we haven't really been told why. The result is increased anxiety and fear.

We also need to consider delayed trauma. During crises, our brains do their best to keep us safe. We made the necessary adjustments during the pandemic (wearing masks, keeping our distance and refraining from physical contact with loved ones such as grandparents and grandchildren), but our brains also recognized, "this is not normal or natural." Add the conflicts and fighting between

individuals, families and communities over the pandemic, political and social issues, and it's easy to see that our minds and bodies have been in the fight, flight or freeze pattern for two years. Now, as we start to relax a bit and think about moving forward, it can cause a delayed trauma response.

How is all of this manifesting in the school environment? Buckelew has experienced increased calls from parents whose kids refuse to go to school. Some worry that they might be exposed to an unmasked, unvaccinated student. Others feel apathy toward education. "How can you expect me to care about math with everything going on in the world?" is a common argument.

There are also increases in behavioral challenges at school and dropping grades. This could be a sign of trauma, which is often misdiagnosed as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Those with cultural differences and language barriers face even

more challenges in school systems.

This massively impacts their ability to learn in school.

Finally, we are seeing increased calls to our 24/7 suicide prevention hotline. I want to encourage anyone who is feeling overwhelmed or in need of support to call 415-499-1100. Your life is always worth a phone call. Trained phone counselors can support you through these difficult moments.

I want to assure parents and teachers that these kids who are acting out or struggling in school are not being lazy or rude — they are having a trauma response and need support. Here's what you can do:

- Talk about it. Build bridges. Extend that olive branch to create a safe space to talk. A schoolwide assembly where all share their concerns is a good start.

- Ensure accessibility to school counselors.

- Incorporate mindfulness. Three minutes of breathing ex-

ercises or mindfulness activities at the beginning and end of class can work wonders to decrease stress and help students calibrate their emotions, making learning more accessible.

- Incorporate social-emotional learning. Use dialectical behavior therapy focusing on emotional regulation. Use the printable worksheet. Download one from bit.ly/3qNcGgX.

- Support local events to raise money for local mental health programs. Our inaugural Bike-4Buckelew event will take place in China Camp on May 14, and there are many other local events and organizations you can support.

Raising awareness increases the opportunity to improve our mental health as a community, and every donation means increased resources to provide support for those in need.

Steve Diamond, of San Rafael, is a program director and mental health counselor for Buckelew Programs.