

# Newcomer Teacher Wellness Mini-Grants : A Formative Evaluation

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This report is a formative evaluation of Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) Newcomer Teacher Wellness Mini-Grant. It includes a background of the program's inception, with a focus on the key role that teacher coordinators played in supporting wellness activities. After illustrating the broad support around wellness activities, it delves into how newcomer teachers feel about collaboration, trust, and school climate. In a push to better understand vicarious trauma, the report closes with insight into different perceptions of wellness activities.

## Introduction

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is undergoing noticeable changes in their student populations, as evident by a marked increase in newcomer students.<sup>1</sup> Newcomer students, who have been in the United States for less than 3 years and speak a language other than English at home, present a unique set of emotional challenges and academic needs. Currently, newcomers students make up nearly 5% of OUSD's elementary enrollment, almost 1 in every 20 students.

The rise in this vulnerable population is often attributed to refugee students and unaccompanied minors who are fleeing violence, human trafficking, and persecution in their home country. The majority of newcomer students, who arrive from Guatemala, El Salvador, China, México, Yemen, and Honduras, are heavily concentrated in a four neighborhoods within Oakland: East Oakland, the Fruitvale District, West Oakland, and Downtown Oakland.

Newcomer students often have an interrupted formal education (SIFE) and typically score at least two years below expected grade level in reading and math. The increase of newcomer students also coincides with an increasing shortage of credentialed teachers, many who are unprepared to meet the language development needs of newcomer students.

OUSD recognizes that newcomer teachers, who face an ordinate amount of stress and often suffer for vicarious trauma<sup>2</sup>, need pedagogical and emotional support. With funding from the Hass Foundation, OUSD embarked upon a district-wide plan to bolster the practice and improve the retention rate of newcomer teachers. One part of this grant was directed to support a pilot program, The Newcomer Teacher Wellness Mini-Grants.

This program, which aimed to improve self-care and increase teacher wellness among newcomer teachers, funded eight schools with small grants (\$3,000-\$5000) to create teacher generated and school-based wellness program. Schools used the grant money to attain the following objectives:

1. Support wellness among newcomer teachers, with specific attention for new

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<sup>1</sup> By the end of the 2016-17 year, newcomer student population reached approximately 2,500 students.

<sup>2</sup> The American Counseling Association defines vicarious trauma as “The emotional residue of exposure felt after people become witness to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured.”

teacher support.

2. Address vicarious trauma and provide teachers with multiple opportunities and resources that support their resilience.
3. Provide models of effective teacher wellness that could be replicated across OUSD.

The focus on teacher wellness represents a new approach to teacher retention, as the bulk of literature and research among wellness deals with other professions, such as social workers.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, OUSD did not require schools to follow a specific plan or program. Rather, the district encouraged teachers to create a ground-up approach that were tailored to the needs of each school.<sup>4</sup>

Proposals were evaluated in June 2017 and funds were distributed at the start of the 2017-18 school year. This report is a formative evaluation of the first year of this pilot program, incorporating a range of qualitative and survey data. This report is *not* a summative evaluation, and does not present any findings that link newcomer wellness grant with teacher retention. Rather, this paper focuses on the implementation of the mini-grants program, providing descriptive statistics and highlighting common findings around program implementation.

## Methodology

I first reviewed the newcomer wellness grant with with OUSD staff, including the Director of Newcomer and ELL programs. I collected and analyzed additional documents, including the grant proposal, evaluation rubric, and school proposals. After collecting data from the annual OUSD school and teacher survey, I compared trends for newcomer students and teachers. I used this data to construct a pilot logic model, creating measurable outcomes for this evaluation.

I collected qualitative data in a two-step approach. First, I spoke with seven teacher coordinators, gaining an better understanding of each school's wellness program, including potential challenges around implementation. I held focus-group interviews with teachers in four schools, speaking with a total seventeen teachers. These semi structured interviews focused on reactions to wellness programs and possible connections between wellness program and their work as teachers. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed.

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<sup>3</sup> A literature review on teacher wellness is found in a companion report by Sarah Snook.

<sup>4</sup> Fittingly, one of the key findings of this literature review was that wellness programs are more effective when they are not imposed upon schools.

Finally, I conducted an online surveys to collect quantitative data. The teacher survey asked about their wellness experience, also probing about teacher trust, collaboration and school climate. I created a separate, short-answer survey for teacher coordinators, inquiring about budgets and program implementation.

### Overview of Newcomer Wellness Program

School	# of NC Students	% Newcomer	% Budget used	Wellness Program
Bret Harte		12.3%	75%	Staff Retreats (3)
Castlemont		13%		Yoga classes
Franklin	81	12%		Staff retreat; Mindfulness training; Yoga classes
Freemont		12%	70%	Staff Retreats (2)
Hoover	20	7%		“Buy-back” wellness program;
Horace Mann	54	16%	100%	Yoga classes
Urban Promise		6%		Rescheduled

The district encouraged schools to create their own wellness programs, supporting a teacher-driven process that encouraged flexibility. As a result, schools employed a range of approaches to improve teacher wellness. One elementary school created a bi-weekly yoga program, hiring a yoga instructor to provide classes at their school site. Another school created “Charge Days” that consisted of three designated wellness days that targeted newcomer teachers and self-care activities. The school provided substitute teaching for these charge days, giving teachers time to reconnect off campus. Another school held two day-long retreats that focused on relationship development and peer support. These retreats, which occurred during the weekend, incorporated nature-based activities, such as boating and hiking. Another school paid teacher for wellness activities, encouraging teacher to take create a weekly log that documented their efforts.

## Findings

**Teacher coordinators played a crucial role in helping schools implement wellness activities.**

Interviews with teacher coordinators indicated they played a crucial role in helping schools implement their wellness activities. Overall, coordinators were responsible for filling out applications and meeting the overarching guidelines for the grant. Many coordinators noted the difficulty in navigating the bureaucratic rules and regulations during the procurement process.

Coordinators needed to fill out various forms for the central office, as many of the desired providers were not district approved vendors. This process, while necessary, was lengthy and appeared to delay several schools in starting their wellness activities. Coordinators needed to follow-up on this process and ensure that the vendors were approved.

One coordinator noted that while she was able to get approval for a yoga instructor, she was denied yoga mats. This small mishap illustrates that coordinators, who also worked as teachers and administrators, needed to prioritize the grant, often dedicating additional time for follow-up. Coordinators also struggled to find appropriate and cost-effective resources, as several noted the desire to find and schedule mental-health workshops. It also proved difficult to find a trauma expert that fit into school's budget. Another coordinator had difficulty getting approval for a mindfulness training, unable to find a approved speaker.

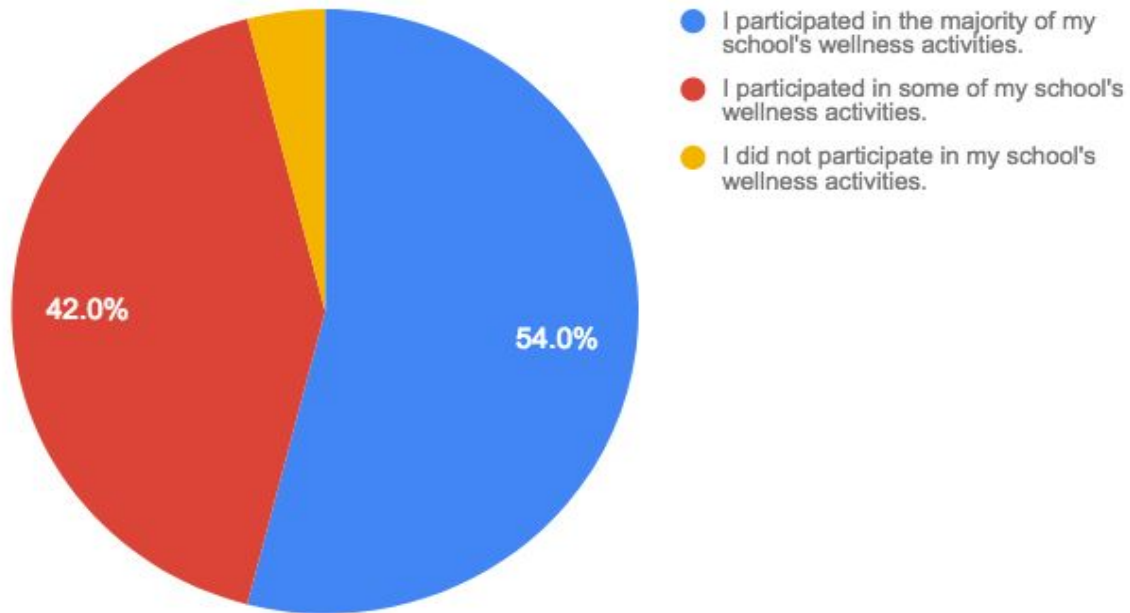
Yet, several coordinators were persistent and successful in navigating this process. One school scheduled and held their first retreat in the early fall, and another school started yoga classes in the late fall. Another school hired substitute teachers to fill-in for newcomer teachers, allowing them to attend a day retreat and discuss their work as teachers. It appears that several schools were successful in utilizing their grants in a timely manner because the school coordinator was effective in navigating the procurement and funding process.

**Newcomer teachers actively participated in their school's wellness activities, finding them to be worthwhile.**

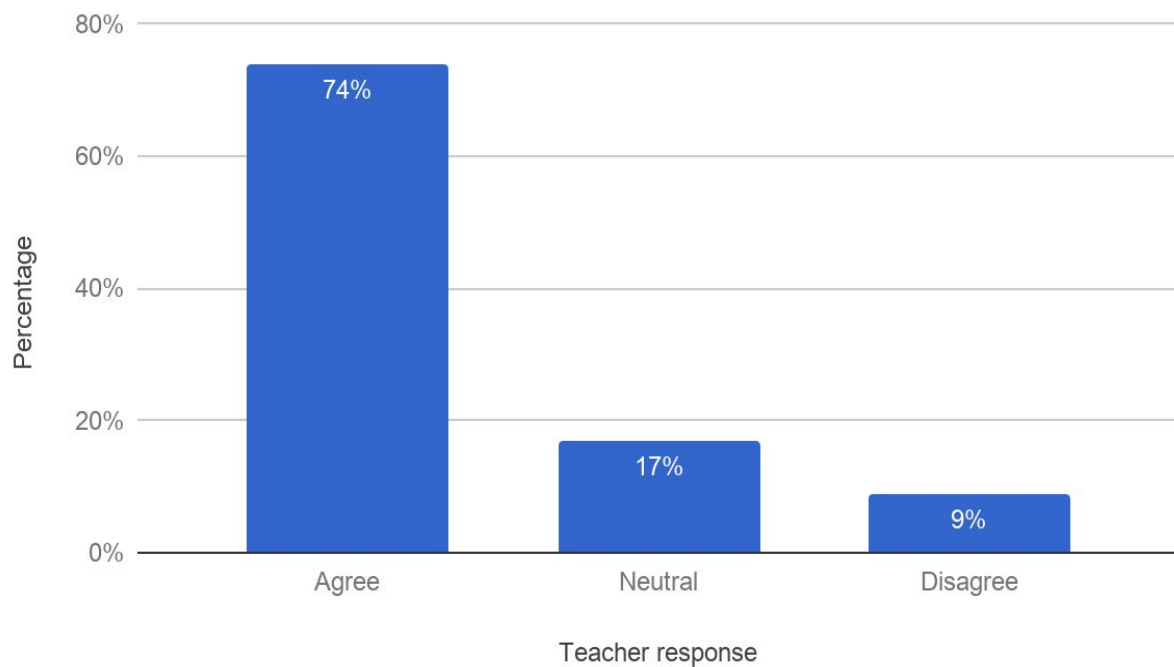
Survey results show there was a strong and positive response from newcomer teachers,

as over 96% of participated in at least some of their school's activities.

### Teacher Participation



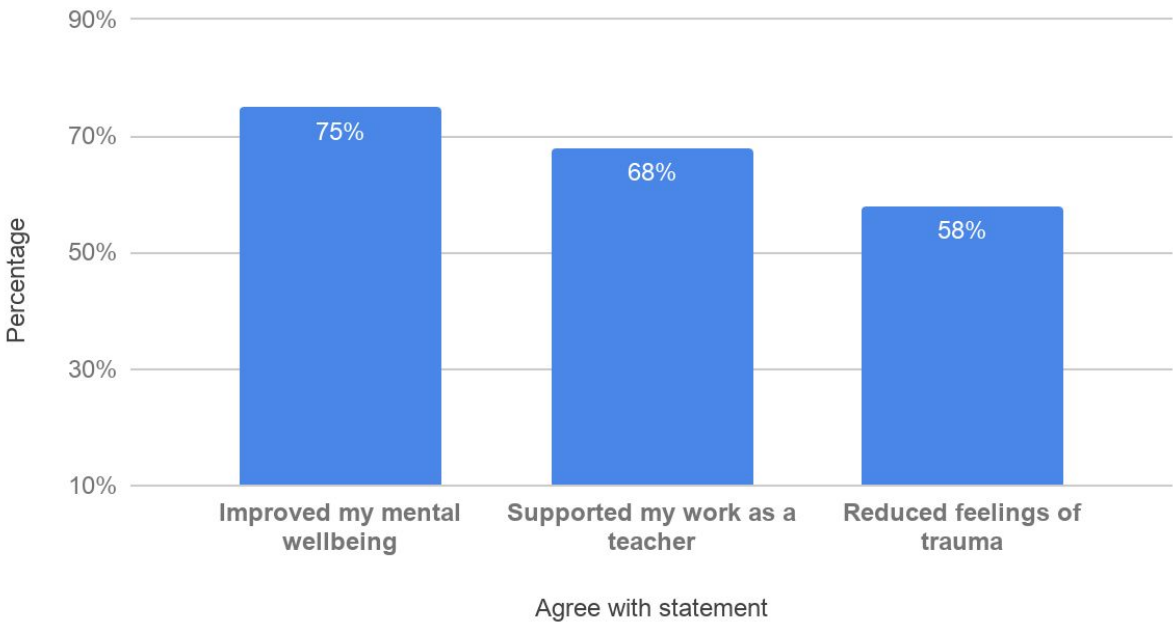
### Wellness activities were worthwhile



The value of wellness activities was evident, as teachers spoke about the challenging nature of the daily work. One elementary teacher noted, “I definitely think that there's some stress and there's definitely a demand in that in that work because it requires a lot of reflective teaching....newcomers come from different languages that are strikingly different so the immediate needs of the students require a lot of assessment and just general awareness and a lot of targeted instruction.” The need for different types of instruction was evident throughout the interviews. One middle school teacher noted that for a majority of newcomers their “education experience is very diverse.. I have some students who have formal education settings and other students who you know this is their first time in a formal education setting.” The diverse academic needs within a classroom was a daily challenge, as one high school teacher noted that teaching newcomers could be “very time consuming and requires a lot of prep and a lot of management... you have to be able to sit down and zero in on a few students at a time and then another few students at a time.”

**Newcomer wellness activities provided diverse opportunities for support.**

**Wellness Activities and Teacher Support**



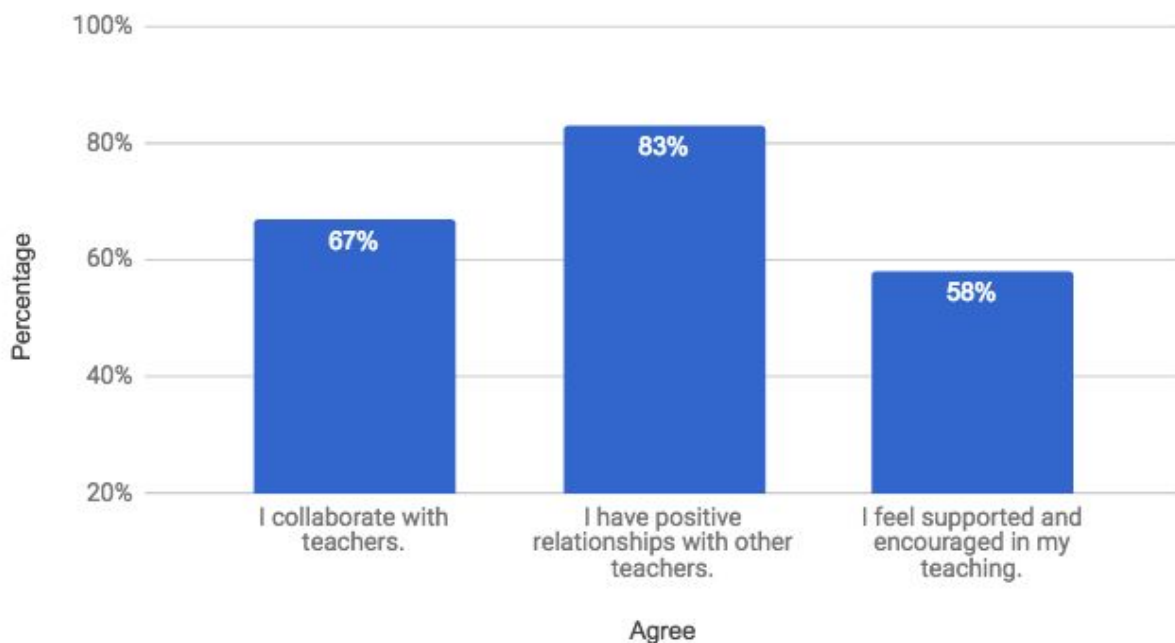
Newcomer teachers felt that grants were beneficial in several ways, as wellness activities helped to improve mental health and supported their work as teachers. One high school teacher noted that wellness activities supported “communication and being able to turn to one another,” underscoring that it helped teachers “not dwell on” negative situations,

instead focusing “on finding solutions...pretty much everybody here is [about] solutions.” A group of elementary teachers connected their wellness programs with their work, as one teacher noted that wellness activities helped her “have a sense of community. I know fully...we call it together. Nestled among our teachers. Okay, so that we feel supported.” Her fellow teacher elaborated, adding that she “felt like I’m I’m more secure in the place that I’m working in know that I that there’s people that could relate to about it that just kind of on my own.”

### **Newcomer teachers reported positive feelings about their school communities.**

Overall, survey responses show that newcomer teachers felt schools provided a welcoming teacher community, as the majority agreed about collaboration and reported positive relationships within their school.

### **Newcomer Teacher Community**



Interviews revealed numerous occasions in which teachers noted that important role that teacher relationships played within their work. Aside for pedagogical support, several teachers spoke of wellness activities as a way to support a deeper connection among teachers. One teacher noted that their wellness program supported an atmosphere where “It was a comfortable enough space where you know folks were free, you know, talk about like this, their past experiences and how it impacts the way they view students and others...[it gave] a comfortable space to self reflect on just our own

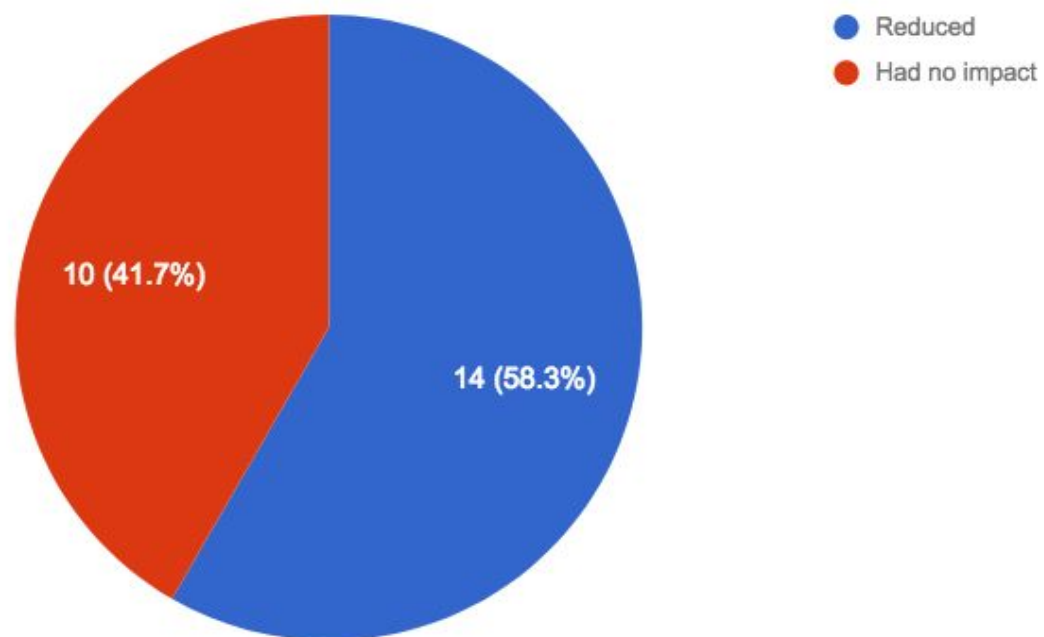


beliefs and practices.” Another teacher remarked how wellness activities allowed teachers to “taking care of yourself so that you can teach and give your best kind of to care.”

### Wellness activities had a mixed impact on vicarious trauma

OUSD hoped that a program of self-care and wellness could help reduce vicarious trauma. However, survey responses indicated that teachers were divided about the specific impact that their wellness activities had on vicarious trauma.<sup>5</sup>

### Did wellness activities reduce Vicarious Trauma?



In an effort to better understand the dichotomy, I created a index, Wellness Support, which included three questions about wellness activities.<sup>6</sup> There was a clear difference between these two groups, as teachers who had reduced feelings of vicarious trauma were more likely to strongly agree with this index, averaging a 2.98 out of 3. However, teachers who had no reduction of vicarious trauma had lower rating of wellness experiences, averaging a 2.13 out of 3, barely above neutral. Teachers who showed no

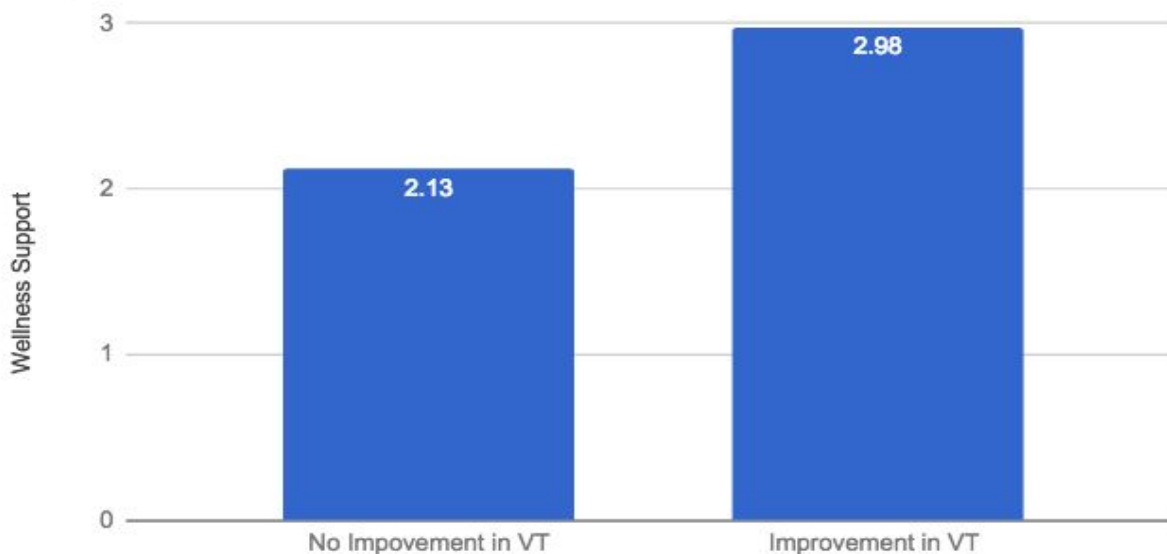
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<sup>5</sup> The question about vicarious trauma offered three options: Disagree, Neutral, and Agree. In order to understand if teacher wellness programs *reduced* trauma, I created a dichotomous variable: Yes or No. Teachers who were neutral were labeled as “Had no Impact”

<sup>6</sup> This index was a combination of three variables: My school’s newcomer teacher wellness activities: were worthwhile; improved my mental wellbeing; supported my work as a teacher.

reduction in vicarious trauma had a less positive attitude towards their wellness.

### Understanding Vicarious Trauma: Perceptions of Wellness Support



### Recommendations:

1. Help support teacher coordinators as they navigate the budget process. Coordinators could maintain a master list of approved vendors that newcomer schools can access and update. It would be helpful to include budgets and see if schools could combine services, as district officials could possibly negotiate lower fees. Finally, coordinate with the OUSD wellness office, utilizing the knowledge and capacity of current wellness champions.
2. Teachers might benefit from resources that are provided *outside* of school. An important aspect of combating vicarious trauma is to “create a supportive culture” that “allows and encourages teachers to seek support or talk about their mental health.”<sup>7</sup> The district could create a mental health checklist/framework to help teachers better understand their stress, also including off-site services (such as therapy/counseling).
3. Explore if the district could utilize the capacity and knowledge of current counselors/social workers that are funded by the Salesforce grant. While this staff is dedicated to newcomer students, they have a deeper knowledge and understanding about mental health and strategies to reduce stress and anxiety. Their work could translate into a deeper understanding around vicarious trauma, including possible practices/programs that could be adopted and/or modified at the school-level.

<sup>7</sup> PLUS presentation from April 27, 2018.