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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Why It Matters to All of Us: Alhambra USD Century High School Wins CDE 2018 Model Continuing High School Award

We know that outward violence begins with early disconnection and inner loneliness. AUSD Century High School addresses those wounds for at-risk students.

In an era of mass school shootings, educators and school boards everywhere search for the hard-headed security protocols for locking down classrooms to evade a gun-wielding intruder, working in partnership with local law enforcement and community service providers. Such updated safety and crisis response drills and policies are essential. But they are only part of the answer.

AUSD Superintendent Denise Jaramillo knows that keeping students and schools safe also requires something more subtle, ongoing and just as urgent: early and comprehensive K-12 mental health education, assessments and services for its 17,000 students, their families and mental health training for the entire AUSD staff. “We know, for instance, that school expulsions breed rage and retaliation which can end badly,” says Jaramillo. “Data show that out-of-school suspensions produce students who will either become the victims of — or perpetrators of — violence. Through our nationally recognized Gateway to Success program, we not only have our ever-updated school safety plans and drills in place, we also work hand-in-hand with the Alhambra Police Department and other community partners to keep students in school and connected to multiple resources to show them positive ways to get attention, receive encouragement and mentoring. Now neighboring police departments and school districts come to AUSD for guidance in addressing their school safety, mental health education and services issues.”

Founder of Gateway to Success, Assistant Superintendent for Student and Employee Welfare, Dr. Laurel Bear, says, “One of the secrets to identifying a student with a problem is to begin assessing students early and then look for a change in patterns of behavior. That change signals significant distress that requires immediate attention.” Bear points out that shifting to Gateway’s infrastructure of community partners offering resources-based responses to problem student behavior is paying off. Violent crime, truancy, and suicide attempts are all down — as is crime in the surrounding community. Bear also says the district’s annual school climate surveys indicate dramatic improvement in the way students and parents feel about their local schools. “Building that trust is the centerpiece of our approach,” says Bear.

Century High School Principal, Phuong Nguyen, heads a team of seven teachers and counselors who are dedicated to their continuing high school students. These students arrive credit-deficient and with serious life challenges such as being in foster care, abused, homeless, hungry, or in grief. Says Nguyen, “These students are often alone and overwhelmed by depression, anxiety and rage. They have not been able to learn because of their circumstances. We work with each one, create a customized plan of resources and mentors to get them to graduate and, as important, help them to learn to see possibilities.”

Alhambra School Board President, Joanne Russell Chavez, points out, “In this country, we have a crisis of disengaged, disconnected and disempowered young people, many of whom wrestle with untreated mental health challenges. At AUSD Gateway, we created a collaborative network of community supports for what Dr. Bear calls ‘kid-detectors’ — by investing in counselors, mental health education, teaching positive behavior and making sure we have

services to reach out to disconnected youth and pull them back on track. That is the best way to make our schools and our communities safe and violence-free.”

Alhambra Police Chief Timothy Vu adds, “To keep our students safe takes the AUSD Gateway dual efforts of crisis readiness training *and* an ongoing, comprehensive program for school-based mental health assessments, education and services for all students and their families. APD works with AUSD students and parents on many fronts to build a bridge of trust.”

So in this era of the unthinkable, AUSD Century High School stands out as a model of what works and beacon of hope, with heroes and action steps for other districts to emulate. Jaramillo says, “Keeping disaffected children in school and engaged — and off the streets — is an effective way to make schools and communities safer. But just as important, we are also committed to giving students a life-altering path to the future. The award-winning AUSD Team and our invaluable community partners help us accomplish our *Students First* mission.”