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## Want to end childhood trauma? Ask a high school student

**Kasandra Gandara and Dominic Cappello** Your view

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Adverse childhood experiences are a huge threat to our students, diminishing their capacity to learn and succeed. We know from the research that our students suffer when they endure ACEs in the form of abuse, neglect, hunger, and living with parents who misuse substances, are violent, and have untreated mental health challenges. We know in some classrooms as many as three quarters of the students endure three or more ACEs. Our students want help for themselves and their struggling parents.

We have heard them loud and clear, and we have responded by creating the Doña Ana Resilience Leaders program to bring together agency leaders from ten key family-serving sectors to commit to ensuring 100% of our county residents student, parents and grandparents have access to the services shown to prevent ACEs and strengthen families, giving students the support to achieve. Part of this process is listening to the community and hearing their ideas for solutions.

We asked high school students of Oñate High School and Las Montanas High School their ideas for ending ACEs and helping them and their families heal and thrive:

- More school classes on ACEs and education to parents
- Access to the internet for poor families in case of emergency or help
- Lower cost at hospitals
- More involved law enforcement in communities
- Access to transportation
- Safe Haven for youth (an alternative to foster care)
- Better foster care
- More counseling in the workplace and public schools
- ACEs aware at baby doctors
- Scholarships/financial aid
- Sports/clubs

Take us (students) seriously — just because we are young doesn't mean our trauma should be invalidated.

In addition to this list of suggestions, we heard from Las Montanas students that not only did they strongly believe the school needed a behavioral health care center, but the students lead the process of creating one. Working with their teachers, they secured a space that is to be what they call “a safe room” for students. A place to sit, be quiet and regain a sense of calm. A place where a student can talk with others and one on one with an adult staff member. Adults would also be able to refer students to a private counseling session in another room. The students have set up a fundraising site to raise \$5,000 for the safe room, and additional funding to hire two adults to staff the room.

At Resilience Leaders, we're impressed by the intelligence and compassion of high school students who instinctively understand that we all need access to the key services to heal. Our 10 task forces are already working to ensure that 10 vital services exist for all county residents.

Working with our youth, elected leaders and stakeholders, we can create a trauma-free Doña Ana County where all children, students and families find safety and success.

*Kasandra Gandara is a Las Cruces councilperson and developer of the Doña Ana County Resilience Leaders program. Dominic Cappello is the co-author of "Anna, Age Eight: The data-driven prevention of childhood trauma and maltreatment." You may download a copy free at [www.AnnaAgeEight.org](http://www.AnnaAgeEight.org).*