



Del Norte Unified School District: *A Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Services Through Project Cal-Well*

Project Cal-Well is a program that aims to expand mental health services in schools and communities. The program was initiated by the California Department of Education in 2014 and was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) through their "Now Is The Time" - Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education (NITT-AWARE) grant program. In Cohort 2 (2019–24), the California Department of Education partnered with districts across five Northern California counties, including Del Norte Unified School District (DNUSD), to build upon the Project Cal-Well model.

Del Norte Unified School District Overview

DNUSD serves approximately 3,500 students in a rural area on the northern California coast near the Oregon border. The district has 12 schools:

Bess Maxwell Elementary
Crescent Elk Middle
Del Norte High
Joe Hamilton Elementary
Margaret Keating Elementary
Mary Peacock Elementary
Mountain Elementary
Pine Grove Elementary
Redwood Elementary
Smith River Elementary
Sunset High

The student body is diverse, with 47 percent White, 25 percent Hispanic or Latine, 15 percent American Indian, 8 percent two or more races, and 4 percent Asian. The majority of students (67%) are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 7 percent are English Learners, and 5 percent are experiencing homelessness.¹

Project Cal-Well Areas of Focus

DNUSD strives to meet its students' social and emotional support needs and improve the school climate by strengthening its multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). Project Cal-Well provided the foundation to strategically leverage additional sources of funding that became available amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the mental

¹ See California School Dashboard. (n.d.). *District performance overview: Del Norte County Unified*. California Department of Education. Retrieved April 5, 2024, from <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/08618200000000/2023>

health needs of the DNUSD school community. DNUSD has focused on the following activities across the three main components of the Project Cal-Well model.

Component 1: Provide Universal Support to Create Positive School Climates That Help Students Develop Social–Emotional Skills, Promote Resilience, and Increase School Safety (Tier 1)

Strategic planning for school mental health services. Since the start of Project Cal-Well, DNUSD has expanded its Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Committee to include all 12 schools in the district. The Committee includes diverse school staff representation, including principals, counselors, licensed clinical social workers, school psychologists, and teachers. DNUSD also created a [Social Emotional Strategic Plan](#) that articulates the common vision, goals, and objectives specific to mental health. These elements have been integral to the district’s ongoing alignment process as school mental health services expand with the addition of grants and coordination with local resources.

Increasing mental health services awareness. DNUSD has prioritized mental health awareness campaigns aimed at students, educators, and the DNUSD community. These campaigns focus on promoting access to mental health supports and services and on increasing knowledge about various mental health topics.

From fall 2020 through December 2023, DNUSD trained 184 individuals in the mental health workforce, and 757 individuals who were not in the mental health workforce, in strategies to improve the prevention of mental health problems and promote mental health awareness.

Strengthening data-based decision-making.

Project Cal-Well supported DNUSD staff to establish a culture of using data to inform decisions about mental health supports and interventions.

- DNUSD increased its capacity to monitor and better respond to students’ mental health needs by using a multi-informant approach to universal screening. This involved having teachers and students complete the Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS). From fall 2020 through December 2023, DNUSD conducted nearly 11,000 student screenings.
- DNUSD has committed to administering the *School Staff Survey* to provide clearer information about resources to staff and to include discussion of them in staff training. The percentage of school staff agreeing that their school communicates to students about the availability of mental health supports increased from 44 percent in 2021/22 to 71 percent in 2022/23. Furthermore, the percentage of school staff who agreed that their school emphasized mental health assistance increased from 55 percent to 63 percent. Lastly, the percentage of school staff making two or more student referrals to a school-based mental health professional for mental health concerns rose from 29 percent to 60 percent in the past month.
- Additionally, DNUSD now administers the *California Healthy Kids Survey* (CHKS) annually since the inception of Project Cal-Well, informing decision-making yearly rather than biannually. One encouraging finding is the increase in the percentage of secondary students (grades 7, 9, 11) reporting high levels of school connectedness on the CHKS, increasing from 32 percent in 2021/22 to 36 percent in 2022/23.

Component 2: Increase Availability of and Access to School-Based Mental Health Services (Tier 2)

Establishing a referral system. In the past, DNUSD referred students to community partners for behavioral health services. Unfortunately, these services were often unavailable to students due to waiting lists. Moreover, until recently, there was no communication between the district and community providers to ensure students eventually received the necessary help.

With the support of Project Cal-Well, DNUSD established a closed-loop referral system. This system enables community-based service providers to refer students to the district's school-based wellness centers if they cannot meet their needs. The referral system encourages regular communication between the district and the county's Department of Behavioral Health, leading to better identification of areas with unmet mental health needs in the district.

Component 3: Build Partnerships and Cross-System Collaborations to Promote Youth Well-Being and Improve Access to Mental Health Services (Tier 3)

Leveraging Project Cal-Well funding to bolster mental health support. DNUSD leaders focused on using Project Cal-Well to enhance their support and services. They leveraged multiple funding sources to expand Tier 3 capacity to serve youth with the highest mental health needs and further strengthen Tier 1 and Tier 2 prevention and early interventions. For example, Project Cal-Well established Youth

Mental Health First Aid training. Additionally, through a federal Mental Health and Training Grant, the district partnered with a local community organization to fund additional trainers and provide coverage for staff training hours.

Sustaining the Work

Mental health is now a top priority for DNUSD. Schools have included mental health in their annual School Plans for Student Achievement. The recently approved Social Emotional Strategic Plan by the School Board clearly explains how mental health is supported in DNUSD schools.

When Project Cal-Well ends, other funding streams and grants will continue to support the district's efforts to foster the mental health of students, families, and educators. For example, the district's Mental Health and Training Grant will support annual student health and wellness surveys initiated through the Project Cal-Well evaluation. This ongoing data collection will provide longitudinal data about students' experiences in the district. DNUSD plans to expand Medi-Cal reimbursement for behavioral health services by participating in the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative statewide multipayer school-linked fee schedule and statewide provider network.





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