



Project Cal-Well: Building Sustainable School-Based Mental Health Systems



The California Department of Education's Project Cal-Well is designed to raise awareness of student mental health and help expand access to school- and community-based mental health services for youth, families, and school communities. Visit the [Project Cal-Well](#) website for additional information and resources.

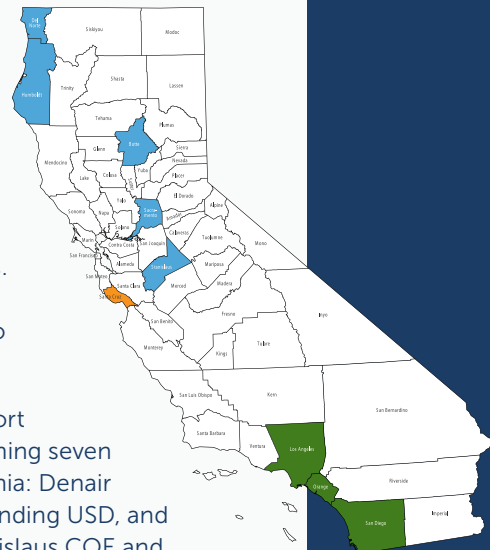
Overview

For almost a decade, Project Cal-Well has focused on building capacity for sustainable school-based mental health systems in local educational agencies (LEAs) throughout California. Led by the California Department of Education (CDE), Project Cal-Well has been funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education) State Education Agency grant program.

As shown in the map, there have been three cohorts of Project Cal-Well, reaching districts throughout California.

- The first cohort (2014–2019) included five Southern California LEAs: ABC Unified School District (USD) in Los Angeles County; Garden Grove USD in Orange County; and Warner USD, Chula Vista Elementary SD, and Mountain Empire USD with San Diego County Office of Education (COE).

- In the second cohort (2019–2024), the CDE built upon the Project Cal-Well model by partnering with three COEs to support eight LEAs across five counties. These LEAs are listed below, along with links to Legacy Briefs for several.
- There is now a third cohort (2023–2028) that is reaching seven LEAs in Northern California: Denair USD, Newman/Crows Landing USD, and Waterford USD with Stanislaus COE and Scotts Valley USD, San Lorenzo Valley USD, Santa Cruz City Schools, Pajaro Valley USD, and the Santa Cruz COE Alternative Ed program with Santa Cruz COE.



Below is a list of the Cohort 2 Project Cal-Well partners along with links to Legacy Briefs for several of them.

**Humboldt County
Office of Education**

- [Del Norte Unified School District \(in Del Norte County\)](#)
- [Northern Humboldt Union High School District](#)
- McKinleyville Union Elementary School District

**Sacramento County
Office of Education**

- [Paradise Unified School District \(in Butte County\)](#)
- San Juan Unified School District

**Stanislaus County
Office of Education**

- Turlock Unified School District
- Hughson Unified School District
- Patterson Joint Unified School District

Project Cal-Well Legacy Briefs

In this series of **Project Cal-Well Legacy Briefs**, we highlight exemplars from California’s second cohort (2019–2024). This cohort started implementation right before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the youth mental health crisis and, in turn, prompted unprecedented funding to support school-based mental health services in California and across the nation. Project Cal-Well was critical in establishing systems for leveraging additional funding and opportunities to expand school mental health services. The Legacy Briefs document the LEAs’ efforts to increase mental health awareness and improve school-based mental health services and program delivery.

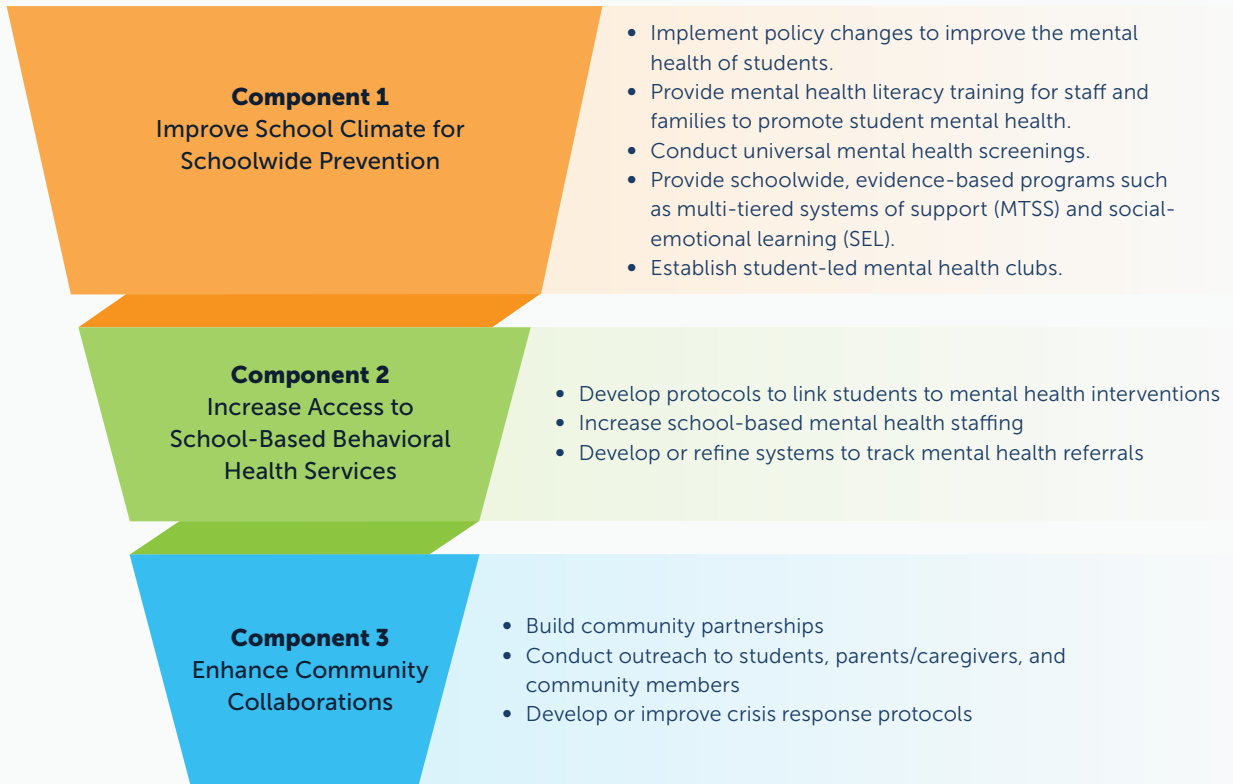
Project Cal-Well planted the seed for our school-based mental health services.

—Christopher Williams, Director of School-Based Mental Health and Wellness, Sacramento County Office of Education

Project Cal-Well Model

Project Cal-Well LEAs used a multifaceted approach to achieve their project goals, emphasizing the importance of collaboration, community engagement, and infrastructure development to establish resilient and sustainable mental health systems in schools. The Project Cal-Well model is anchored by **three components**, as outlined in the figure below.

Figure 1: Three-Component Model



Infrastructure, Data, and Evaluation

Under the CDE's leadership, Project Cal-Well aimed to improve the state-level and local mental health infrastructure and sustainability through leadership and collaboration meetings; the expansion of school-based mental health data collection and dissemination; and the sharing of information on best practices and resources.

As part of the comprehensive Project Cal-Well evaluation, the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) created a custom Mental Health Supports module for the *California Healthy Kids Survey* (CHKS) to assess changes in students' mental health needs and access to support. In partnership with WestEd, the

module was expanded to include additional measures on trauma and is now part of the CHKS Behavioral Health Modules available to LEAs statewide. UCSF also developed a companion Student Wellness Module of the School Staff Survey to assess changes in school staff's capacity to support student mental health over time.

For the evaluation, Project Cal-Well partners provided quarterly Infrastructure Development, Prevention, and Mental Health Promotion (IPP) Indicator data to demonstrate progress toward annual goals. Twice a year, UCSF and the CDE met with the Project Cal-Well LEAs to review data and progress to inform continuous quality improvement.

Project Cal-Well Impact

Project Cal-Well Reach. In Cohort 2, Project Cal-Well schools served more than 21,000 students in 40 elementary and secondary schools across five Northern California counties.

Mental Health Training. During the grant period, the Cohort 2 Project Cal-Well partners trained more than 155,000 Californians who were not in the mental health workforce and nearly 25,000 who were in the mental health workforce in best practices around identifying students needing mental health interventions and in strategies to address their needs. For example, the CDE helped to coordinate [Youth Mental Health First Aid \(YMHFA\)](#) training sessions throughout California to raise mental health awareness among adults who interact with and support youth. The CDE also coordinated numerous mental health workshops with partners to promote staff wellness, address suicide prevention, support student-led mental health clubs, and provide information on many other topics. The participating LEAs also offered a variety of mental health trainings to their school staff.

Access to Services. From 2019 through 2023, the Cohort 2 Project Cal-Well LEAs reported that 13,262 students received mental health services through either school-based or community-based providers after a referral.

School Staff Perspectives. Project Cal-Well LEAs administered the annual *Project Cal-Well School Staff Survey* to assess changes in staff perceptions of student mental health needs and staff’s capacity to support students over time. The percentage of respondents who agreed that their schools provided adequate counseling and support services for students with mental health needs increased from 59 percent in 2021 to 70 percent in 2023. School staff also reported an increased capacity to support students over time (Figure 2).

Figure 2: School Staff Confidence in Mental Health Support Actions: Trends and Changes Over Time (2021–2023)

| For each statement, indicate how confident you are that you can successfully do these things. (Percent reporting “very confident”) | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|--|------|------|------|
| Refer a student in need to mental health supports or services. | 49% | 51% | 57% |
| Recognize a student who may be in emotional distress or at risk due to stressful or traumatic life events. | 39% | 43% | 44% |

Summary and Legacy

Project Cal-Well has leveraged leadership at the state, county, and district levels to expand students' access to a continuum of mental health services. The program also prioritized raising mental health awareness among young people and their school communities. The legacy of Project Cal-Well is represented in multiple documents.

The UCSF Project Cal-Well evaluators developed and shared research briefs on their [School Health Evaluation and Research Team website](#), including the [Statewide Principals Survey Summary Report](#) and the [Youth Mental Health First Aid Training brief](#).

Project Cal-Well developed numerous accessible resources on [California's Safe and Supportive Schools website](#), including briefs on supporting students during the pandemic through social, emotional, and behavioral [screening](#) and on building social and emotional [connectedness](#), as well as the newly published [Family Guide to Supporting Young People's Mental Health and Well-Being](#), which is available in English and Spanish.

Finally, the Legacy Briefs referenced at the beginning of this document highlight the successes across the Project Cal-Well partners, a testament to this model's impact.

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