



Northern Humboldt Union High School District: *Aligning Mental Health Initiatives With a Multi-Tiered System of Supports Through Project Cal-Well*

Project Cal-Well is a program that aims to expand mental health services in schools and communities. The California Department of Education initiated the program in 2014 and has led its implementation ever since. The program 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 Northern Humboldt Unified High School District (NHUHS), to build upon the Project Cal-Well model.

NHUHS has undertaken a strategic initiative in collaboration with Project Cal-Well to strengthen its mental health system and support. Through partnerships with Project Cal-Well, the Humboldt County Office of Education (HCOE), and County Children’s Behavioral Health, NHUHS implemented various initiatives to refine mental health services, enhance staff training, and integrate data-driven practices.

Northern Humboldt Union High School District Overview

Situated in northern California, in the homelands of the Wiyot people, NHUHS serves the communities of Arcata,

McKinleyville, Blue Lake, Trinidad, Fieldbrook, Manila, and Bayside in Humboldt County. NHUHS serves approximately 1,800 students across the following schools:

Arcata High School
McKinleyville High School
Six Rivers Charter High School
Pacific Coast High School (Continuation)
Mad River High School (Continuation)

Most NHUHS students are White (62%), while 25 percent are Hispanic or Latine, 15 percent are American Indian or Alaska Native, 11 percent are two or more races, and 2 percent are Asian. Almost half of the students (45%) are

socioeconomically disadvantaged, 2 percent are English Learners, and 6 percent are experiencing homelessness.¹

Project Cal-Well Areas of Focus

NHUHSD has taken a proactive approach to meeting students' mental health needs through Project Cal-Well. The district shifted toward a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) approach, allowing it to implement a sustainable school mental health system.

NHUHSD's efforts are evident in how it has built connections with community partners, empowered staff, and provided a continuum of support and services that have positively impacted students. This approach involves implementing several activities across the three main components of the Project Cal-Well model. The primary components of NHUHSD's Project Cal-Well work are described below, with further descriptions of how each component impacted areas of work in the district.

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)

Social–Emotional Learning. NHUHSD implemented various social–emotional learning activities at classroom and school levels. This included the development of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), such as behavior flowcharts clearly defining major and minor behaviors. It actively involved students in program

planning. Moreover, it established student reward systems and provided training and support for administrators, teachers, and staff.

Professional Development Training. The district also built its school mental health capacity by conducting training sessions. From fall 2020 through December 2023, NHUHSD trained 86 individuals in the mental health workforce. Additionally, 1,129 individuals who were not in the mental health workforce received training in strategies aimed at improving the prevention of mental health problems and promoting mental health awareness.

Suicide Prevention. NHUHSD worked closely with Two Feathers Native American Family Services to train staff and students in Sources of Strength (SOS), a peer-based mental health and suicide prevention resiliency program. To address suicide prevention, student-led SOS clubs were established on secondary campuses.

Universal Mental Health Screening. To inform intervention, the district implemented a universal screening process with the Student Risk Screening Scale (SRSS)² to gather information about students' mental health. Over the period from fall 2020 through December 2023, NHUHSD conducted 6,637 student screenings through Project Cal-Well.

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

Tier 2 supports have evolved at NHUHSD to include early intervention strategies to address the diverse needs of students. Teams across the district committed to building out their PBIS Tier 2 systems

¹ California School Dashboard. (n.d.). *District performance overview: Northern Humboldt Union High*. California Department of Education. <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/12626870000000/2023>

² Drummond, T. (1994). *The Student Risk Screening Scale (SRSS)*. Josephine County Mental Health Program.

and practices, such as Check-In-Check-Out³ and group therapy. The district implemented Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) improvement cycles to monitor the progress of individual students. The Intervention Team leading Tiers 2 and 3 also developed a more streamlined approach to identifying and assisting students in need, including a process for responding to intervention referral forms. Finally, the district established internships for future school mental health professionals and hired additional staff to meet the full range of students' mental health needs.

From fall 2020 through December 2023, 79 percent of the 828 students referred to mental health services from NHUHSD schools received services from either school-based or community-based providers to address their mental health needs. These efforts have shown promising outcomes, as evidenced by positive trends in the district's *California Healthy Kids Survey* (CHKS) data. For example, when secondary students in the district were asked about barriers to talking to a counselor or therapist in the past year, the percent who reported "they wouldn't understand" or "people would think there's something wrong with me" declined.

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

NHUHSD strengthened multiple community partnerships to improve the delivery of school-based behavioral health services and programs. Tier 3 supports include individual therapy sessions, crisis response interventions, and targeted assessments tailored to students' needs. School mental health staff provide direct services to students and work

with teachers and parents to address students' mental health concerns. Through new funding, the district has hired three credentialed school social workers to deliver and/or facilitate the delivery of Tier 3 services.

Sustaining the Work

To coordinate Project Cal-Well and other school mental health initiatives, NHUHSD created a grant matrix to align the district's many school-based mental health grants, projects, and initiatives. Throughout the 5-year Project Cal-Well grant, NHUHSD received additional grants to support and sustain the district's ongoing capacity-building of their school mental health system. By tracking all of this information in one physical document, NHUHSD leadership can better understand its assets and how various activities align with each other and be intentional when making decisions about adopting new practices.

NHUHSD will sustain its school mental health system beyond Project Cal-Well through several key strategies for continued support:

- establishing a structured system that unites efforts across the district, HCOE, and local agencies to align services and supports for students and their families
- incorporating key mental health indicators from the CHKS into the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)
- implementing an MTSS approach for continuous improvement toward a comprehensive, multitiered mental health system

³ Crone, D. A., Hawken, L. S., & Horner, R. H. (2010). *Responding to problem behaviors in schools: The behavior education program*. Guilford Press.

- conducting ongoing program mapping of all school-based mental health activities to facilitate planning and alignment of NHUHSD grants supporting school mental health
- leveraging School-Based Mental Health Services Providers grants from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education in the short term and a Medi-Cal fee schedule in the long term to provide payment to school-based mental health service providers
- preparing to use the Statewide Multi-Payer School-Linked Fee Schedule to access ongoing, non-Prop 98/general fund funding to sustain mental health service providers



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