

This brief was developed by WestEd on behalf of the California Department of Education's Project Cal-Well in collaboration with project partners and program evaluators at the University of California, San Francisco.



Sacramento County Office of Education: *Transforming Schools Into Centers of Wellness*

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 Sacramento.

Sacramento County Office of Education Overview

Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) serves 13 school districts, with services reaching nearly 250,000 students.¹ Approximately one third (33%) of the students are Hispanic or Latine, 27 percent are White, 17 percent are Asian, 10 percent are African American, and 8 percent are two or more races.² Many students (18%) are English Learners.³

In addition to supporting their Project Cal-Well partners, Paradise Unified School District (Butte County) and San Juan Unified School District (Sacramento County), SCOE has focused on transforming all schools within the county into “centers of wellness.” SCOE prioritizes the placement of mental health professionals in every school and the creation of systems where all adults can contribute to supporting a school–community continuum of care.

¹ DataQuest. (n.d.). *2022-23 enrollment by grade: Sacramento county report*. California Department of Education. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrGrdLevels.aspx?cde=34&aggllevel=county&year=2022-23>

² DataQuest. (n.d.). *2022-23 enrollment by ethnicity and grade: Sacramento county report*. California Department of Education. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cde=34&aggllevel=county&year=2022-23>

³ DataQuest. (n.d.). *2022-23 enrollment by English language acquisition status (ELAS) and grade: Sacramento county report*. California Department of Education. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/EnrELAS.aspx?cde=34&aggllevel=County&year=2022-23>

SCOE leaders have approached their work with an entrepreneurial and collaborative mindset. They use a collective impact model to align and transform how the health and education systems work together to address the mental health needs of Sacramento County school communities. Partners include the County Department of Health Services; regional Medi-Cal plans; all districts and schools under SCOE's purview; and many student, family, and community partnerships. The organizations are committed to learning together and aligning and integrating their activities to "achieve population and systems-level change."⁴ Through these efforts, SCOE aims to interrupt the "school-to-prison" pathway, mitigate the onset and impact of mental health disorders in the region, and improve the overall academic achievement of students across the county.

SCOE leaders rely on the core values of relationships, collaboration, and equitable access to care to shape their work. They also have a strong commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and seek to dismantle systems of oppression by considering every decision through an equity lens. They focus on improving systems so that improvements or services are not limited to the capacities of a single person.

Project Cal-Well Areas of Focus

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

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

⁴ Sacramento County Office of Education. (n.d.). *School-based mental health and wellness*. <https://www.centersofwellness.scoe.net/our-work#collectiveimpact>

Project Cal-Well has played an instrumental role in supporting SCOE's leadership in transforming their youth-serving systems. Some of the specific changes that SCOE has undertaken through Project Cal-Well follow below.

Centralizing Mental Health Services

SCOE hires clinicians who are then placed in schools under the Sacramento County Health Center, a Federally Qualified Healthcare Center (FQHC) eligible for Medi-Cal billing. These clinicians provide clinical mental health services (Tier 3) to students and support Tier 1 and Tier 2 prevention and early intervention programs and services at school sites. Additionally, SCOE manages the responsibility of Medi-Cal billing, which removes the administrative burden from the schools and allows for centralized data tracking (e.g., numbers of students served).

Building a Mental Health Career Pathway

To address the shortage of available mental health clinicians, SCOE utilizes peer specialists, graduate clinical interns, and associate clinicians in paid positions to provide career support while establishing a professional pathway for school-based mental health service providers. Internships for undergraduate and graduate students are available, and practitioners with a graduate degree in associate clinician positions can earn clinical hours while employed full-time.

Expanding Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Since 2019, SCOE has supported 3,000 educators in almost 200 schools in receiving SEL training through [RULER at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#). SCOE distributed additional funds from [CalHOPE](#) throughout the region to bolster this SEL work. Furthermore, through Project Cal-Well, SCOE trained 833 individuals in the mental health workforce and 3,104 individuals who were not in the mental health workforce. This training focused on strategies to improve the prevention of mental health problems and promote mental health awareness.

Refining Coordination of Services Teams (COST)

COST plays a pivotal role linking students in Sacramento County schools to a range of mental health support and services within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Rather than relying on direct referrals to clinicians, COST coordinates referrals using systematic and proactive approaches (e.g., universal screening data). This ensures that students' needs are met through appropriate channels (e.g., a student is not inappropriately referred to therapy when there is a classroom-based issue).

Developing Collaborations and Partnerships

Through Project Cal-Well, SCOE established or renewed 70 community partnerships to improve school-based mental health services and programs. These partnerships aimed to reduce stigma and expand direct care services and family education in an overall effort to alleviate barriers and support clinical care. In addition, recent partnerships contributed to nurturing the School Based Mental Health and Wellness Path, one of SCOE's Career Pipeline Paths, which was designed to support students and professionals interested in school-based mental health and wellness careers.

Sustaining the Work

Moving forward, SCOE plans to designate schools as satellite centers of the County Health Center, enabling school sites to benefit from enhanced Medi-Cal billing and offer more billable services to students on-site. To streamline administrative processes, SCOE will maintain centralized billing processes, reducing the administrative burden on schools.

SCOE leaders are combining one-time funds from various initiatives, including those from Project Cal-Well, the Mental Health Student Services Act Grant, the Student Behavioral Health Incentive Program, and partnership and capacity-building grants. These funds will be combined with reimbursement options, such as those available through their FQHC, School Medical Administrative Activities (SMAA), and the multi-payer fee schedule, ensuring sustainable financing for mental health services in schools.

SCOE is actively building its capacity statewide to implement the programs and processes that have been successful in Sacramento County. The website, centersofwellness.scoe.net, offers information about each element of SCOE's comprehensive strategy for mental health. It is currently being expanded to include a roadmap for collaborative partners and resources for local education agencies within and outside of Sacramento County. Moreover, SCOE offers guidance and support to organizations throughout California that are interested in replicating their work.



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