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# Supporting School Climate Efforts: How California Districts Are Using School Climate Survey Results



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## Introduction

Across California, schools and districts depend on data to identify challenges, monitor progress, and advance their school climate goals. Districts use many types of data to support school climate improvement efforts. These may include administrative data spanning referrals for mental health care, student disciplinary data, parent involvement at school, and staff retention. However, administrative data tell only part of the school climate story.

For this reason, schools and districts place special value on the information that students, staff, and parents share about their perceptions and experiences of support and safety at school. Surveys are one common method that schools and districts use to gather data from a diverse range of community members.

In California, nearly 70 percent of districts regularly administer the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey System (CalSCHLS), a set of three modular surveys for students, staff, and parents. CalSCHLS was developed and subsidized by the California Department of Education as a tool to support school improvement efforts in K–12 school districts. In combination with other types of school climate data that schools collect, access to CalSCHLS data can support school communities in

- » informing strategic goals and priorities;
- » identifying assets, inequities, and opportunities for growth;
- » developing plans and selecting interventions;
- » recognizing milestones and setbacks in school performance; and
- » adjusting strategies as needed to best serve students, staff, and families.

Districts that participate in CalSCHLS receive their survey data annually or biannually in the form of district- and school-level reports and a password-protected dashboard. More information about CalSCHLS can be found in Appendix A.

In the fall of 2023, WestEd spoke with seven school districts to learn how they are using CalSCHLS data to improve school climate. Districts shared a variety of strategies for reviewing data, identifying opportunities for action, and determining next steps, all of which demonstrate responsiveness to the ever-changing factors of district and school cultures, staff capacity, and availability of quality data. This resource explores how seven California districts are drawing on the knowledge and insights of students, family members, and staff to leverage CalSCHLS data results in their efforts to build and sustain positive, supportive school climates. Schools and districts can use this resource to support their own continuous improvement efforts.

## District Approaches to Reviewing School Climate Survey Data, Identifying Assets and Opportunities, and Developing Action Plans

Districts across California demonstrate flexibility and innovation in their use of CalSCHLS data to strengthen school climate practices. Below, we explore district-led strategies, district- and school-facilitated strategies, and community-driven strategies to support the process of identifying the most appropriate approach within a school community.

## District Staff–Led Approaches to Reviewing CalSCHLS Data

District office staff play an important role in initiating and facilitating district and school use of CalSCHLS data. This process can often begin with the district staff person or team who receives raw CalSCHLS data. As district staff embark on a district-led data review process, one observed practice is to analyze trends across schools while considering larger districtwide initiatives. For most of the interviewees, district staff were responsible for regular review of the data, engaging in such activities as analyzing data to answer specific questions, comparing trends over time, and identifying notable patterns or data points. Subsequently, district staff may then be responsible for creating summaries or reports and for communicating their findings to senior district administrators, school administrators and staff, district and school committees, students, parents, and other educational partners.

When collecting school climate data, it is important to consider who will review the data and who will initiate the next steps to act on what is learned. Proactive decision-making enables staff to respond promptly to the data. Below are examples illustrating how Oxnard Union High School District and Turlock Unified School District are supporting a data-informed culture within their local schools, how Patterson Joint Unified School District presented their strategic planning response plans to leadership to create a sense of shared ownership, and how Sweetwater Union High School District developed staff listening circles to better understand staff wellness.

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### Oxnard Union High School District: District Staff Insights Informing Program Decisions

In Oxnard Union High School District (OUHSD), district staff lead an ongoing data inquiry process involving interest holders in education to enhance student wellness. By convening regular check-in meetings with key school staff and asking questions such as, “What are you noticing?” or “What are some trends you’re seeing with the data?” OUHSD district staff are leading both teachers and administrators to see the value that collecting, exploring, and acting on California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) data has for school climate improvement.

Historically, OUHSD staff have used 9th and 11th graders’ responses to the CHKS to guide the district’s Tobacco Use Prevention Education (TUPE) programming and other efforts to address substance use and vaping among students under the assumption that 11th grade is a critical time for drug and alcohol prevention efforts. A few years ago, funding briefly enabled the district to conduct the CHKS with 10th grade students as well. When the district staff reviewed the results of these new data, they were surprised to find that the largest increase in students’ reported use of substances and vaping took place not between 10th and 11th grades but between 9th and 10th grades.

Guided by this new knowledge and with the support of temporary pandemic grant funding, the district invested in drug and alcohol prevention efforts, including an emerging student leadership conference focused on 10th graders. District and school staff continue to work in partnership to increase the use of health fairs and to tailor health class activities based on what district staff are learning from CHKS data.

**“We use the data to tell us, ‘*This is what we need to do.*’”**

—Carrie Wolfe, Program Specialist, Student Support Services, Oxnard Union High School District

### **Patterson Joint Unified School District: Bringing Survey Data to the School Board**

When Patterson Joint Unified School District (PJUSD) reviewed their CHKS data, they found that seven indicators were trending against state averages. These were school safety, school connectedness, harassment/bullying, chronic sadness, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, and current vape use. PJUSD used their data points to inform strategic planning and presented response plans to their school board. Because PJUSD was concerned with all seven indicators, they adapted current programming and created new programming to address the data, such as a three-tiered multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) approach for reducing vaping, instead of suspending students or just hiring more mental health counselors.

During the presentation to the board, PJUSD shared longitudinal data highlighting 15 years of CHKS trend data, allowing the board to observe historical patterns and prompting conversations about the district's strategic plans to address these results. The presentation to the board was crucial in justifying the school district's planned use of resources and creation of needs-informed programming to address all seven indicators. Additionally, as the district has implemented response programming, regular updates have been provided to both the board and the community on their progress in implementing change.

**“We’re all moving together in the same direction [and] collaborating with each other. We’re sitting in each other’s meetings, using our strategic plan to guide our [decisions], and talking about the same goal.”**

*—Tracy Manzoni, Assistant Superintendent,  
Student Services, Patterson Joint Unified  
School District*

### **Turlock Unified School District: Communicating Survey Results to Schools**

In many districts, district staff and school staff share the responsibility of reviewing and interpreting CaSCHLS data. One common strategy involves district staff leading the initial data review before engaging with school staff to interpret the data and identify next steps. For example, each year Turlock Unified School District (TUSD) creates a presentation for each principal containing packaged findings based on their specific school's data, and then district staff meet with each principal to develop a better understanding of the stories and issues behind the data. Although the district leaves it up to the principals to decide what to do with the data, district staff take the lead on convening monthly check-in meetings with the principals.

## Sweetwater Union High School District: Staff Listening Circles

As Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD), the largest secondary school district in California, resumed in-person learning after the pandemic, there was a surge of requests from school staff for support with student behavior interventions. This led the MTSS District Leadership Team to further explore CaSCHLS results. From this deeper inquiry, district staff recognized that prioritizing staff well-being supports would be critical to addressing student needs in the long term.

At SUHSD's Castle Park Middle School, a closer examination of the California School Staff Survey (CSSS) data led to the creation and implementation of restorative staff listening circles. The listening circles revealed a growing need to address staff wellness in the face of increasing teacher burnout. Castle Park leveraged support from the National Conflict Resolution Center to facilitate several sessions and trainings for staff. Afterward, the school's leadership team disseminated data findings from the listening circles to the entire staff. Staff input and recommendations were actively sought out in order to address the challenges identified during the listening circles. One teacher characterized this staff engagement process as “a chance for us to come together and realize we were having a collective experience rather than an individual experience.”

This staff engagement initiative catalyzed a shift in focus at Castle Park from emphasizing standards and learning to prioritizing social-emotional learning and restorative practices. Additionally, it led to the creation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) at the school. On April 19, 2024, SUHSD joined the California Center for School Climate and the California Department of Education for a webinar to share more about this data-informed school climate improvement journey.

## Leveraging Existing Structures to Review Data

Leveraging existing structures to review data can vary depending on a district's or school's current systems and capacity. After collecting survey data, finding the time to review results can be daunting due to the busy schedules and routines of daily school environments. Instead of creating a new space for data sense-making, schools and districts should assess the structures currently in place and then leverage those opportunities to involve a diverse group of educational partners in the data review process. There is no “one size fits all” method. Examples of structures that may exist within a typical school community can include student clubs, staff meetings, and committee meetings. These spaces, either separately or in combination, can be used to engage various educational partners in data review and to understand the “why” behind the data through this collaborative approach to collecting feedback from the community.

Whether it is a district or a school reviewing specific pieces of raw data or identifying overall patterns within it, sharing that information with others encourages greater engagement and interest in the planning and implementation of data-informed change. In the following examples, read how Corona-Norco Unified School District and San Juan Unified School District leveraged the existing structure of student clubs to interpret data and develop action plans.

## Corona-Norco Unified School District: Convening Students to Interpret Survey Results

In Corona-Norco Unified School District (CNUSD), district staff regularly disaggregate and share CHKS data with district administrators and school leadership to inform policies and practices at both levels. Additionally, they organize student focus groups to interpret data and discuss key patterns that emerge from the initial analysis of survey data. Students as young as those in 5th grade may be asked to participate in these discussions.

Several years ago, district staff identified troubling trends in CHKS data regarding suicide ideation and chronic sadness reported by students identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. To better understand students' experiences and how best to support them, district staff organized meetings to share and discuss the data with members of the district's Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSAs), student-led clubs intended to provide safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ students.

Student GSA members were invited to share their reactions to the CHKS data and discuss ways to improve support from both schools and the district. Students expressed a need for more opportunities to ask questions, share their experiences, and voice concerns directly to district administrators. While a district-level GSA already existed at the time, students did not feel that it met their needs. In response to the feedback, CNUSD staff modified its district-level student GSA to include regular interactions between LGBTQIA+ students and district administrators.

**“We are using [data] to inform; we’re not just looking at the data to say, ‘oh, that’s interesting.’ We want to make sure that we’re addressing areas [where] we’re seeing issues. And we pretty much do that by school site and then drill down even deeper to subgroups.”**

—Carol Coyne, Tobacco Use Prevention  
Education Program Manager, Corona-Norco  
Unified School District

## San Juan Unified School District: Response Plans With Student Clubs

Within the San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD), numerous opportunities exist for educational partners to review and use CalSCHLS data collaboratively. Many of these opportunities are integrated into existing school and district improvement structures and family engagement initiatives. For example, spaces like Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) Workshops; Parent Power Hour Workshops; and the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) Committee meetings serve as platforms for school and district staff to share CalSCHLS survey results with the school community to gather input, hear reactions and ideas, and better understand the data's context.

At one school site, funds from the TUPE grant helped launch a student club in which students were asked to share their thoughts on the reasons behind the high percentage of students reporting vape use. Through this thoughtful exchange between staff and students, staff learned that easy access to vape products was a major reason behind the high reported levels of vaping. Through collaboration, staff and students identified solutions to address the issue, leading to a student-led effort to assess local community stores' compliance with age restrictions on vape product sales. When stores were found to be noncompliant, students took proactive measures by writing letters outlining clear next steps to protect minors from vaping products.

**“There’s endless opportunities for [using] CHKS data – endless. ... If [district staff] look at the results first and see what students are saying...they’ll be able to develop and figure out ways they can use [the data], especially if they’re listening to the concerns of the district, the concerns from staff and parents and students.”**

—Gaylon Johnson, Supervisor of Prevention Programs, Student Support Services, San Juan Unified School District



## Expanding Opportunities for Data Access

Another approach used by the California school districts interviewed was increasing data access at schools by creating avenues for school personnel and educational partners to actively lead and engage in the data use process. With this approach, any community member has the opportunity to identify data points of interest, dig deeper into the stories behind the data, and convene discussion and planning groups to democratize efforts to improve student success.

Prioritizing data access across school districts enables individuals outside of leadership to be responsive to data results and make data-informed decisions. What follows are two examples from SUHSD and PJUSD illustrating how integrating data access at schools resulted in strategic decision-making and action planning for school climate improvement and collaboration.

### Sweetwater Union High School District: School Climate Data Profile Dashboard

SUHSD provides a clear example of a participatory approach to data use. Committed to making data broadly accessible across the district community, SUHSD has invested in years of collaborative efforts between SUHSD's MTSS District Leadership Team, SUHSD EdTech, the San Diego County Office of Education, Site Leadership Teams, and various SUHSD schools. These efforts aim to make data more widely available.

One of the district's primary strategies has been the development, within its Data Insights platform, of an in-house, password-protected school climate data dashboard. The dashboard serves as a centralized hub where interest holders can access all data relevant to student outcomes, including nonacademic data, at any time. With the ability to automate one easy-to-access report that includes the CHKS results

along with other social-emotional learning, behavior, and academic data, school sites can independently generate and review school-level whole-child data. This empowers them to identify assets and areas of growth and to promote the community engagement work necessary for an effective response.

**“Without the CHKS data, we wouldn't have anything to innovate on.”**

*—Luis Lopez, Equity & Culture Curriculum Teacher on Special Assignment, Sweetwater Union High School District*

## **Patterson Joint Unified School District: Community Conversations**

PJUSD is invested in making data more broadly available across the community to encourage data-informed school climate interventions. The district is equipping principals, counselors, and students with the skills, mindsets, and dispositions needed to analyze data and act upon insights derived from them. Through the Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS) Program, PJUSD encourages students to host conversations regarding both the CHKS and their PLUS survey findings. These conversations provide spaces for students to dig deeper with their data, identify additional questions, and monitor changes using surveys they design for their peers. PLUS Program students subsequently review survey results and collaborate with each other, the lead teacher, counselors, and the site administrative team to problem-solve and ask, “How are we going to address [this] at our school site?”

## **Conclusion**

Schools and districts across the state share a commitment to using data to support their school improvement activities. This resource highlights examples from a select group of California school districts that are using CalSCHLS data to strengthen their own school climate practices. How districts determine their approach depends significantly on resources, including budget and staffing, and other unique contextual factors.

Many districts who read this resource may see their work reflected in any combination of district-led, school- and committee-led, and community-led approaches to using CalSCHLS data. Below are a few key points to keep in mind when considering how to balance the various potential roles and steps in a data use process.

**Figure 1. Summary Tips for Data Collection**



## Appendix A. About CalSCHLS

Developed by the California Department of Education in partnership with WestEd, the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys (CalSCHLS)<sup>1</sup> is the largest and most comprehensive statewide survey system in the nation. CalSCHLS is used by K–12 schools and districts across California to gather vital information about school climate, student health, and learning environments from school and district staff, students, and parents.

Designed to be a flexible system, CalSCHLS can be customized to explore local needs through the addition of optional modules to address specific concerns such as substance abuse, school safety, and physical health. At its core, the system consists of three main surveys:

1. **California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS)**

**Audience:** students age 10 and older

**Purpose:** to collect data on a range of topics including student wellness, school connectedness, engagement, and risk behaviors

2. **California School Staff Survey (CSSS)**

**Audience:** school staff

**Purpose:** to assess the school climate from the perspective of staff, focusing on issues such as the teaching and learning environment, student support, parent involvement, and school safety

3. **California School Parent Survey (CSPS)**

**Audience:** parents and guardians

**Purpose:** to gather input from parents about their child's school, touching on areas of parental involvement, school climate, student well-being, and the home–school connection

Participating districts receive their survey results in the form of a dashboard, which includes both district- and school-level reports. More information about CalSCHLS is available at <https://calschls.org>.

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1 [https://www.WestEd.org/area\\_of\\_work/resilient-and-healthy-schools-and-communities/calschls/](https://www.WestEd.org/area_of_work/resilient-and-healthy-schools-and-communities/calschls/)

## Appendix B. About the Participating Districts

**Table B1. District Demographics**

District name	Grades served	Student enrollment	Locale	State region
<b>Corona-Norco Unified School District</b>	K-12	50,790	City	Inland Empire
<b>Galt Joint Union Elementary School District</b>	K-8	3,352	Town	Southern San Joaquin Valley
<b>Oxnard Union High School District</b>	9-12	17,770	City	Central Coast
<b>Patterson Joint Unified School District</b>	K-12	6,177	Town	Northern San Joaquin Valley
<b>San Juan Unified School District</b>	K-12	49,036	Suburb	Superior California
<b>Sweetwater Union High School District</b>	7-12	37,642	City	San Diego - Imperial Valley
<b>Turlock Unified School District</b>	K-12	13,664	Suburb	Northern San Joaquin Valley

Note. Grades served and enrollment numbers for 2022/23 retrieved from [www.ed-data.org](http://www.ed-data.org). Locale classifications retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/>. Regional location retrieved from <https://census.ca.gov/regions/>.