



2020-21 Evaluation Highlights

The California Department of Education's (CDE) Project Cal-Well program consists of a comprehensive model of interventions aimed at expanding school and community-based mental health services. **Project Cal-Well's mission is to increase awareness of and improve mental health and wellness of California's students and provide training for school personnel to detect and respond to mental health issues.** CDE has implemented Project Cal-Well since 2014 with two cohort of local education agencies (LEAs). The current cohort of Project Cal-Well California schools, located in five Northern California counties, including Humboldt, Del Norte, Stanislaus, Butte, and Sacramento, are in their second year of implementation.

Report Overview

This brief report highlights the success and lessons learned in Year Two (2020-21) of Project Cal-Well's implementation. Data are drawn from the following sources:

- *Project Cal-Well School Staff Survey*: This online survey assesses staff's perceptions of students' mental health needs and access to support services to address these needs, as well as staff's experiences with secondary trauma and capacity to support students' mental health needs. A total of 683 school staff responded across seven Project Cal-Well school districts.
- *California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) Mental Health Supports Module*: The CHKS is a statewide survey of students' resiliency, protective factors, risk behaviors, and school climate. A custom module was created for the Project Cal-Well evaluation to collect data on students' mental health needs, perceptions of stigma, and access and barriers to care. In the 2020-21 school year 5,353 students in seventh, ninth, and eleventh grades completed the survey.
- *LEA Quarterly Progress Reports*: Representatives from each lead LEA completed quarterly progress reports to describe their activities and progress toward grant goals.
- *Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) Surveys*: The National Council for Mental Wellbeing, which leads YMHFA trainings, shared matched pre and post survey data from 819 participants during the 2020-21 school year. UCSF also administered a one-month follow-up survey, which was completed by 569 training participants.

The University of California, San Francisco School Health Services Research & Evaluation Team is evaluating Project Cal-Well and produced this report: <https://healthpolicy.ucsf.edu/school-health-services-evaluation>

Student Mental Health Needs

The 2020–21 school year was one of an unprecedented public health crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools were mostly closed, and staff and students were faced with challenges of distance learning, and the challenges of the pandemic.

According to the *Project Cal-Well School Staff Survey*:

- Over half (59 percent) of school staff in the Project Cal-Well schools reported that social, emotional, and mental health needs were very common among students.
- The majority believed that they could make a difference through their work (79 percent) and they could support students with their overall well-being (66 percent).
- However, many school staff felt worn out because of their work (42 percent) and overwhelmed because their workload seemed endless (39 percent).

According to the *CHKS*:

- Most students in Cal-Well secondary schools felt that mental health was an important issue for people their age (85 percent) and that their schools encouraged youth to take care of their mental health (74 percent).
- However, only 63 percent reported that they knew where to go at school when they have mental health concerns and less than half (45 percent) of secondary students who wanted to talk to a counselor/therapist about their mental health said they received help when they needed it.



Three-Component Model

Given these challenges, the work of Project Cal-Well is more important than ever to support students' mental health needs. Project Cal-Well used a three-component model:

1	2	3
Create positive school climates that promote resilience, healthy socio-emotional development, and well-being for ALL students.	Increase availability of and access to school-based mental health services for students and their families.	Build partnerships and cross-system collaborations to promote youth well-being and access to community-based services

GOAL 1: Improving School Climate

The first goal of Project Cal-Well is to provide universal supports to create positive school climates that help school-aged youth develop skills to promote resilience and pro-social behaviors. Cal-Well partners used a variety of strategies to meet this goal.

Project Cal-Well schools focused on **training school staff** to implement schoolwide school climate interventions. Over 25,000 individuals were trained in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative practices, trauma-informed care, and Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA).

- *Impact on School Staff:* Perhaps partly due to the trainings, most Project Cal-Well school staff reported that they felt very confident that they could successfully develop caring relationships with students (82 percent) and create classroom climates that fostered a sense of safety and belonging (72 percent).
- *Impact on YMHFA Trainees:* Most (78 percent) of those trained in YMHFA were not in the mental health workforce, demonstrating the reach of these trainings to those who might otherwise not have these skills. Nearly all (97 percent) found lessons learned from the training helpful in supporting youth during the pandemic.

“Because I attended the training, I was able to recognize the key phrases which triggered me to think students were in danger of harming themselves. I was able to mediate help for them and they got the help they needed immediately.”

-YMHFA Training Participant



Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Project Cal-Well schools utilized creative strategies to **screen students for mental health needs**. For example, Patterson USD administered the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to parents. Mental health clinicians provided follow-up to students identified at risk. Paradise USD implemented Kelvin “pulse” checks four times during the year to ask students how they were doing. Students that requested individual check-ins were followed up with directly. Finally, Northern Humboldt Union High SD implemented Tier 3 Mental Health Screenings allowing teachers to flag students through Student Assistance Team.

Through Stanislaus COE, **NAMI on Campus High School (NCHS) Clubs**, which raise mental health awareness on school campuses, were started in each of the three partner school districts (11 high schools and one junior high). Memoranda of Understanding were completed, advisors identified, and students recruited.

Goal 2: Providing School-Based Mental Health Services

The second goal is to increase access to and availability of school-based mental health services. Given the enormous needs, and improved efforts to track referrals, 2,030 **students were referred for mental health services**. Schools maintained or increased mental health staff through local universities and community agencies, and telehealth services. Successes included the work of Sacramento COE to place mental health clinicians in schools countywide, and Stanislaus COE providing each Cal-Well school campus with a graduate student mental health intern from local area colleges. However, only 59 percent of school staff reported that their school provided adequate counseling and support services. Perceived barriers included challenges with parent concerns or consent (73 percent) and students being afraid of what people might think (63 percent).

"We need more counseling support at our campus to serve our students that are struggling so much with school closures, anxiety, depression, academic concerns and family issues."
– School Staff Member

GOAL 3: Community Partnerships to Expand Services

The third goal is to build partnerships to promote youth well-being and increase and improve access to sustainable culturally competent and developmentally appropriate community-based mental health services.

Project Cal-Well sites developed 32 **new community partnership** with local school districts for trainings and sharing of resources, and with local mental health providers and universities to provide staffing. Schools also reported new and creative strategies to conduct **community outreach**, including social media postings, posting resources on websites, virtual town halls for parents, and emails to share resources.



Conclusions and Next Steps

Project Cal-Well made significant progress in Year Two, despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. This work will continue with a focus on supporting school staff and students returning to in-person learning and coping with increased mental health needs resulting from the pandemic. The Project Cal-Well team will continue to implement the program to support California students' mental health and well-being.