

# Youth Perspectives on School Behavioral Health

What Young People With Lived Experiences in Justice Systems Want School Communities to Know



July 2026

Developed by the Behavioral Health Student Services Act Evaluation team at WestEd in collaboration with the California Office of Youth and Community Restoration Youth Advisory Board. Funded by California's Commission for Behavioral Health.



## Acknowledgments

The California Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) Youth Advisory Board partners with state leaders to “transform systems of harm and failures into networks of care and success.”

Eight members of the OYCR Youth Advisory Board partnered with WestEd’s Behavioral Health Student Services Act (BHSSA) Evaluation team to coauthor this report.

The BHSSA Evaluation team at WestEd would like to thank the contributing members of the Youth Advisory Board for their invaluable insights.

## A Note on Terminology

At times, this report departs from the terminology commonly used in school behavioral health literature. Rather, it reflects language used and validated by the Youth Advisory Board. For example, we use “school behavioral health infrastructure and supports” in place of “school behavioral health systems” to better reflect how young people described their experiences.

# Building Stronger School Behavioral Health Infrastructure and Supports Through Youth Voice

Youth with lived experiences in justice systems — and youth who are likely to become impacted by them — often come to school carrying unseen burdens that shape how they learn, relate to others, and heal. Recent estimates show that more than 30,000 youth in California experience juvenile justice systems involvement through arrest each year.<sup>1</sup> For these youth, schools can have a significant impact on their behavioral health, overall wellbeing, and long-term outcomes. Research shows that prevention-focused approaches — including school behavioral health supports — can strengthen protective factors and reduce risk factors linked to justice systems involvement.<sup>2</sup> Through the Behavioral Health Student Services Act (BHSSA) and other major initiatives, California has invested in rehabilitative and prevention-oriented school behavioral health infrastructure and supports aimed at reducing youth justice systems involvement.

To help inform the state’s efforts, WestEd partnered with eight members of the California Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) Youth Advisory Board to coauthor this report as part of the statewide BHSSA Evaluation ([Appendix A](#)). The Youth Advisory Board is made up of young leaders with lived experiences in justice systems. They use their experiences and expertise to advocate for alternatives to incarceration through policy change and systems improvement. For this report, Youth Advisory Board members analyzed statewide data and shared their perspectives on how schools can strengthen behavioral health infrastructure and supports to address challenges before they escalate into justice systems involvement. The report concludes with recommendations for policymakers and school behavioral health systems leaders.

## Key Takeaways

- Statewide data indicate that students most likely to be impacted by justice systems report lower levels of school connectedness, optimism, support from adults, and overall wellbeing than do their peers.
- Youth Advisory Board members identified trusting relationships with adults and a strong sense of belonging as critical factors necessary to support student behavioral health and disrupt pathways to justice systems involvement.
- Youth Advisory Board members described how punitive and exclusionary responses can cause students to feel disconnected from school, supportive relationships, and needed services.
- Ensuring that students most likely to be impacted by justice systems benefit from school behavioral health supports requires approaches that are accessible, responsive, and tailored to their lived experiences.

“At the end of the day, the data shows a pattern, but behind each number is a kid with a story — and too many of those stories include adults who weren’t there when it mattered most.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

## School Behavioral Health and Juvenile Justice Systems Involvement

Increasingly, school behavioral health interventions are recognized as an important strategy for identifying student needs early and reducing exclusionary practices that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>3</sup> Research suggests that schools can support prevention and early intervention efforts through a continuum of tiered behavioral health interventions.<sup>4</sup> Despite the strong and growing body of evidence on how to effectively support students who are experiencing adverse conditions, these supports are not reaching all students consistently. This is particularly true for students most likely to be impacted by justice systems.

In recent years, California has made substantial investments in prevention, diversion, rehabilitation, and reentry supports for youth impacted by justice systems. These efforts include the creation of the OYCR, which promotes rehabilitation-focused approaches that emphasize behavioral health support, family engagement, education, restorative practices, and successful community reentry for justice-impacted youth. The BHSSA At-Promise Grant Program also plays an important role by funding school behavioral health services for students who may be at increased risk of behavioral health challenges, school disengagement, or justice systems involvement.

Additional related initiatives in California include the Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act of 2000, Youthful Offender Block Grant Program, Proposition 47, California Community Schools Partnership Program, Board of State and Community Corrections Youth Reinvestment Grant Program, and the CalAIM Justice-Involved Re-Entry Initiative. Through these efforts, California is working with schools to reduce exclusionary discipline, improve continuity of behavioral health care during reentry, and increase wraparound supports for youth returning to school following their justice systems involvement.



# What Do We Mean by “Most Likely to Be Impacted by Justice Systems”?

Understanding where school behavioral health infrastructure and supports are falling short, and for whom, requires a working definition of and terminology for students at elevated risk of justice systems involvement.

Research has identified certain student behaviors — such as involvement in physical fights or carrying weapons on campus — as indicators that are associated with higher rates of suspensions, school arrests, and subsequent justice systems involvement.<sup>5</sup> These behaviors do not occur in isolation. They are closely linked to community conditions including school environments.<sup>6</sup> Addressing these patterns in effective ways requires coordinated, cross-sector efforts that target the underlying family, school, and community factors that shape opportunities and outcomes for youth.

For the data in this report, WestEd used questions from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), a statewide student survey that measures school climate and student mental health and wellbeing. These questions identified students who reported engaging in one or more of the behaviors linked to justice systems involvement within the past 12 months.

Specifically, students responded to survey items that asked how many times they had been in a physical fight, carried a gun, or carried another weapon (such as a knife or a club) on school property.

The Youth Advisory Board chose to use the term “most likely to be impacted by justice systems” to describe students who reported engaging in any of these behaviors at least once. Approximately 10% of all CHKS respondents in the state fell into this group.



## Centering Youth Voice in Data Analysis

WestEd collaborated with the Youth Advisory Board in a multistep process to select CHKS data to examine, interpret findings through the lens of their lived experiences, and develop recommendations for school behavioral health systems leaders. Early in the process, Youth Advisory Board members identified six school climate and wellbeing topics from the statewide CHKS that they believed were most important for understanding pathways toward justice systems involvement. They reviewed CHKS data related to each of the six topics and responded to prompts about what might help explain the patterns observed in the data and what schools could do differently to better support students. The data was disaggregated to compare respondents most likely to be impacted by justice systems ( $n = 101,003$ ) with all other student survey respondents ( $n = 955,439$ ).

WestEd analyzed these responses to identify themes and then met again with Youth Advisory Board members to validate and refine their reflections. Together, WestEd and the Youth Advisory Board translated members' insights into a set of actionable recommendations for behavioral health systems leaders. This approach centered youth input throughout the process, ensuring that the report's conclusions are grounded in both statewide data and the lived expertise of young people who have direct experiences with justice systems.

## Youth Experiences: What the Data Shows

In their analysis of the data, members of the Youth Advisory Board chose to focus on the following factors that they felt shape behavioral health and the likelihood of justice systems involvement:

- School connectedness
- Social-emotional distress
- High expectations from adults at school
- Caring adult at school
- Optimism
- School absences due to mental health challenges

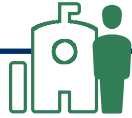
Details on the survey questions associated with each of these factors are included in [Appendix B](#).

Across all measures, students most likely to be impacted by justice systems reported lower levels of support and wellbeing than their peers reported. The Youth Advisory Board suggested that these findings highlight critical gaps in how current systems are reaching and serving students. The figures within this report illustrate differences between students most likely to be impacted by justice systems and their peers. All differences between groups presented in this report are statistically significant at  $p < .001$ .

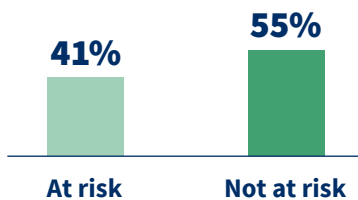
In the bar charts on the following pages, “at risk” is used to represent the students most likely to be impacted by justice systems and “not at risk” is used to represent all other students.



## School Connectedness



Only 41% of students most at risk of justice systems involvement said they feel connected to school. For students who are not at risk, that number is 55%. ***In other words, students most likely to be impacted by justice systems report feeling connected to school less often than their peers do.***



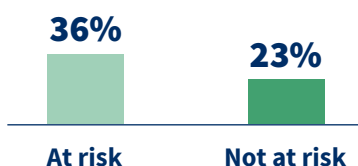
“Some students act out or disconnect because they’ve learned that adults either let them down or see them as a problem instead of a person. If you’re constantly getting suspended or sent out of class, you never get the chance to build the kind of relationships that could keep you connected to school.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

## Social–Emotional Distress



Thirty-six percent of students most at risk of justice systems involvement said they have been distressed recently. For students who are not at risk, that number is 23%. ***In other words, students most likely to be impacted by justice systems report experiencing social–emotional distress more often than their peers do.***



“The number of students who are dealing with social–emotional distress doesn’t shock me, just because of the fact that a lot of us that have been impacted by the system understand the stress that comes from all angles — whether it’s family problems at home, not having that sense of motivation for ourselves, or any pressure that comes from our environment.”

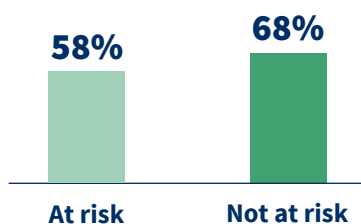
— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

## High Expectations



Only 58% of students most at risk of justice systems involvement said they feel that adults at school hold high expectations of them. For students who are not at risk, that number is 68%.

***In other words, students most likely to be impacted by justice systems are noticeably less likely than their peers to report that adults at school hold high expectations of them.***



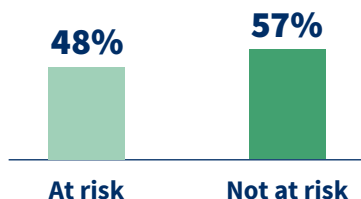
“Some students feel disconnected from school or do not feel supported by adults. Students who have been judged in the past or disciplined often may feel like teachers expect less from them. When students feel misunderstood or unheard, it can be hard to stay hopeful.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

## Caring Adults



Only 48% of students most at risk of justice systems involvement said they have a caring adult at school. For students who are not at risk, that number is 57%. ***In other words, students most likely to be impacted by justice systems report having a caring adult at school less often than their peers do.***



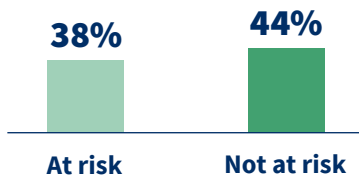
“Before my incarceration, I would’ve been in that ‘at risk’ group. I didn’t feel like I had an adult at school who really knew me or cared about what I was going through. Looking back, I think if someone had reached out earlier before things got bad, it could’ve changed everything. ... The data backs that up.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER



## Optimism

Only 38% of students most at risk of justice systems involvement said they feel optimistic. For students who are not at risk, that number is 44%. ***In other words, students most likely to be impacted by justice systems are less likely to feel optimistic than their peers do.***



“ If a student is already involved with the justice system ... and then they come back into a regular school, they’re labeled as they’ve been to jail or a troublemaker, which would make it very hard for them to feel positive about their future, especially [related to school].”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER



## Mental Health–Related Absences

Fourteen percent of students most at risk of justice systems involvement said they have missed days of school due to mental health–related issues. For students who are not at risk, that number is only 8%. ***In other words, students most likely to be impacted by justice systems report missing school because of mental health challenges more often than their peers do.***



“ A lot of ‘at-risk’ students are dealing with heavier stuff like stress at home, trauma, money problems, feeling unsafe, or feeling judged at school. If you’re always getting in trouble or being watched more, that can mess with your mental health.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

# What Youth Said: Reflections and Insights

The themes that follow summarize five insights from the Youth Advisory Board's review of the six data topics they selected from the CHKS. These insights cut across multiple areas of student experience, including caring adults, optimism, social-emotional distress, and mental health-related absences. Together, they help explain some key factors that shape the behavioral health and wellbeing of students whose lives are affected by complex circumstances.

**Adverse experiences outside of school affect student behavioral health, especially for those likely to be impacted by justice systems.**

“Some may come from unstable home situations where there's not enough food, consistent housing, or an adult who's present and dependable. Others might have experienced trauma or neglect, which makes it hard to trust anyone, let alone a teacher or counselor.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

Participants noted that stress, past and ongoing trauma, and unstable home environments were likely contributors to the social-emotional distress, mental health-related absences, and low levels of optimism observed in the data. They emphasized that many students — especially those most likely to be impacted by justice systems — are navigating challenges outside of school that may influence their behavioral health and wellbeing. These challenges can include trauma, financial stress, housing instability, or difficult family situations.

These realities impact how students behave in school, including their ability to concentrate, regulate emotions, and trust adults. From the Youth Advisory Board's perspective, understanding student behavioral health and wellbeing requires recognizing the broader contexts in which students are living.

## School behavioral health infrastructure and supports do not serve all students.

“The students who need the most help are often those who feel it the least.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

Youth Advisory Board members noted that students most likely to be impacted by justice systems reported lower levels of support and wellbeing at school across all observed data than their peers do. Participants explained that labeling, stigma, and repeated disciplinary experiences had made it harder for them to trust adults or seek help. They shared that when students feel judged rather than supported, it can negatively affect their behavioral health and wellbeing. Participants also noted that during the times they most needed support, school staff responded punitively or didn't recognize the signs that they needed help.

## School belonging matters for student wellbeing.

“It was hard to feel connected to a school in which there was nothing to feel connected to.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

Youth Advisory Board members saw low levels of school belonging as a symptom of unsupportive adult relationships and feeling disconnected from school. When students do not feel understood by teachers, do not see their own background or experiences reflected in the curricula, cannot connect with their school's culture, or experience repeated negative interactions with school staff, they feel isolated from the school community.

The Youth Advisory Board also shared that exclusionary discipline can negatively impact school belonging and positive relationships with adults and peers — relationships that are often essential for student wellbeing.

## Many students are suffering, not just those most likely to be impacted by justice systems.

“This data makes me feel concerned because less than half of students say they feel optimistic. ... That means many students are not expecting good things to happen. It shows that a lot of students may be feeling stressed, unsure, or discouraged about their future.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

Participants also emphasized that the data reveals widespread challenges related to student behavioral health and wellbeing for *all* students. For example, fewer than half of students reported feeling optimistic about the future. Although it is important to recognize the disparities between students most likely to be impacted by justice systems and students who are not, the Youth Advisory Board stressed that *many* students are experiencing stress, uncertainty, and emotional challenges.

To them, this indicates that there are simply not enough counselors, mentors, behavioral health supports, safe spaces, or services addressing basic needs (e.g., food, housing, transportation). From their perspective, schools should prioritize behavioral health and wellbeing for all students while also providing tailored support for those who may need extra care or attention.

## Adults can make a big difference.

“Adults should hype students up more and show them paths to real goals like jobs, college. ... It’s easier to feel hopeful when you can actually see a future.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

Despite the challenges reflected in the data, the Youth Advisory Board also pointed to signs of hope. For example, nearly half of students most likely to be impacted by justice systems reported having at least one caring adult at school. The Youth Advisory Board emphasized that relationships like these can have a powerful impact on student behavioral health and wellbeing. Many described how a teacher, counselor, or mentor who believed in them

and encouraged their potential helped them feel seen, supported, and hopeful about their future. Their reflections highlight how supportive adult relationships in schools can play an important role in strengthening student wellbeing and helping young people imagine new possibilities for their lives.

## Translating Youth Voice Into Action

California's investments in school behavioral health have expanded services and created new opportunities to support young people. However, the experiences shared by Youth Advisory Board members and the statewide data presented in this report suggest that important gaps remain.

Despite these investments, the Youth Advisory Board highlighted that:

- Many students still do not have a trusted adult at school.
- Students most likely to be impacted by justice systems report lower levels of school connectedness, optimism, and support than do their peers.
- Behavioral health needs often go unrecognized until students are already struggling or in crisis.
- Exclusionary discipline practices continue to cause some students to feel disconnected from school, supportive relationships, and behavioral health services.
- Existing behavioral health supports do not always reflect the experiences, strengths, and needs of students most likely to be impacted by justice systems.

The recommendations that follow are intended to address these persistent gaps through strategies that strengthen relationships, improve access to support, reduce barriers to care, and make school behavioral health infrastructure and supports more responsive to students' experiences. The Youth Advisory Board's recommendations point to concrete actions that state and local leaders can take to strengthen prevention, increase access to services, and ensure that students who are struggling receive the kind of support they need, at the times they need it.

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### Build school environments that promote belonging and wellbeing.

“If students don't see themselves in their teachers or feel misunderstood, they might not open up even if an adult reaches out. Mental health struggles, language barriers, and simply feeling invisible can all contribute to a student falling into that 'at risk' category without anyone really knowing what's going on beneath the surface.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

### Current Gap

Although substantial statewide investments in school-based prevention and wellness initiatives have been made, many students still do not report feeling connected to school or having a trusted adult they can turn to for support. These gaps are especially pronounced among students most likely to be impacted by justice systems. Youth Advisory Board members emphasized that there remains a critical need to strengthen relationships and belonging in order to prevent behavioral health challenges from escalating.

### Youth Perspective

The Youth Advisory Board emphasized that schools should prioritize creating environments in which students feel seen, respected, and supported. When students feel connected to their school community, they are more likely to care about and remain engaged in school, which further supports their behavioral health.

Students most likely to be impacted by justice systems are ...

**12**  
**PERCENTAGE POINTS**  
**LESS LIKELY THAN**  
**THEIR PEERS TO FEEL**  
**THAT A TEACHER**  
**BELIEVES IN THEIR**  
**POTENTIAL**



... suggesting that messages of belief are not reaching all students equally.

### Recommended Actions

- Prioritize positive student–adult relationships as a core component of behavioral health support in schools. Intentional check-ins and small efforts to build relationships can go a long way toward boosting student wellbeing.
- Normalize conversations about mental health and reduce stigma around seeking help so that students feel safe discussing challenges and accessing supports without fear of judgment.
- Create mentoring or advisory programs that ensure that every student has access to a trusted adult at school.
- Provide community-building opportunities (e.g., clubs or peer groups) for students that strengthen peer relationships and school connectedness.
- Implement regular celebrations of students’ strengths, effort, and progress to reinforce positive identity and belonging.
- Talk about students’ interests, goals, and futures, and find opportunities to make connections with classroom activities. Help them see pathways to jobs, college, and life after school.

## Shift from punishment to support.

“Using supportive approaches instead of punishment could also keep students connected and feeling believed in.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

### Current Gap

Despite statewide investments in prevention, diversion, and rehabilitation initiatives, Youth Advisory Board members described experiences with disciplinary approaches that left students feeling disconnected from school and support. They shared that when schools exclude students from school or label them as problems, students may lose access to the relationships and behavioral health services that can help them succeed.

### Youth Perspective

The Youth Advisory Board stressed that schools should implement disciplinary policies that support students rather than exclude them or add additional barriers to receiving behavioral health services. These policies should help students remain connected to school and establish positive relationships whenever possible.

Students most likely to be impacted by justice systems are ...

**15**  
**PERCENTAGE POINTS**  
**LESS LIKELY THAN**  
**THEIR PEERS TO**  
**REPORT FEELING**  
**FAIRLY TREATED**  
**AT SCHOOL**



... highlighting a meaningful disparity in school experience.

### Recommended Actions

- Implement restorative practices that focus on repairing harm and strengthening connection rather than relying on punitive or exclusionary discipline.
- Offer reentry support to help students who are returning from juvenile justice placements feel welcomed rather than labeled or stigmatized.
- Ensure that responses to students' behaviors consider the underlying mental health, social-emotional, or environmental factors influencing those behaviors.
- Train educators and staff to respond to student challenges with empathy and understanding.
- Connect students who display challenging behavior with an adult they trust to help them feel safe and heard before making a referral for services or taking disciplinary action.

## Increase access to behavioral health services and supports.

“Some students might have had adults let them down before, so it’s harder for them to trust people at school. On the other hand, students with IEPs might have more adults checking in on them, which could explain why they report more caring adults [at school].”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

### Current Gap

California has made significant investments in strengthening school behavioral health infrastructure and expanding access to school behavioral health services and supports. Yet many students continue to report high levels of emotional distress, and students most likely to be impacted by justice systems are more likely to miss school because of mental health challenges than are their peers. The Youth Advisory Board noted that these findings highlight persistent gaps in access to timely and effective behavioral health support.

### Youth Perspective

The Youth Advisory Board consistently highlighted the need for more robust behavioral health supports and services within schools. Many students — especially those who experience high levels of stress or adversity — need accessible, timely, and culturally responsive support. Youth Advisory Board members emphasized that early access to support can play an important role in preventing crises and justice systems involvement.

Among students most likely to be impacted by justice systems ...

**those with IEPs report**



**GREATER ACCESS  
TO CARING ADULTS**



**HIGHER  
EXPECTATIONS  
FROM ADULTS**

... which the Youth Advisory Board saw as an indication that formalized supports increased access to positive relationships.

### Recommended Actions

- Create safe and confidential spaces where students can seek help, such as wellness rooms or counseling centers. These spaces can allow students to take a break, regulate emotions, and talk with a supportive adult before reaching a crisis point.
- Ensure school staff understand the full range of behavioral health services available both on campus and in the community and have clear processes for making timely referrals.

- Train school staff to recognize early signs of behavioral health challenges and refer students to appropriate support. Encourage staff to initiate check-ins when they notice something may be wrong instead of waiting for students to ask for help.
- Partner with community-based organizations and behavioral health providers to expand the range of services available to students.

## Design behavioral health supports that are responsive to students' lived experiences.

“Many students feel overwhelmed by school and life. Some students may feel alone, stressed, or under a lot of pressure. Others may feel like they do not fit in or are not good enough. These feelings can build up and cause emotional distress.”

— YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

### Current Gap

California's investments in behavioral health, reentry, and prevention programs have increased the availability of supports for young people. However, Youth Advisory Board members emphasized that available services do not always reflect students' lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, or individual needs. Some students may be reluctant to seek help because of stigma, past experiences, or a lack of trust in adults, highlighting the need for more responsive and flexible approaches.

### Youth Perspective

Youth Advisory Board members emphasized that behavioral health support in schools should be responsive to the diverse ways in which students experience stress, trauma, and emotional challenges. Effective behavioral health services should offer multiple ways for students to engage with support. Participants emphasized that schools should meet students where they are and provide supports that feel relevant, accessible, and responsive to their needs.

Students most likely to be impacted by justice systems are ...

**11**  
**PERCENTAGE**  
**POINTS MORE**  
**LIKELY THAN**  
**THEIR PEERS TO**  
**REPORT FEELING**  
**OVERWHELMED OR**  
**CLOSE TO PANIC**



... reflecting elevated emotional strain.

### Recommended Actions

- Implement a whole-person approach to student behavioral health and wellbeing.
- Behavioral health approaches should focus on helping students see themselves as capable, valued, and able to imagine a positive future.
- Ensure all students' basic needs are met (e.g., food, transportation, housing) alongside behavioral health supports to reduce stress.
- Offer multiple ways for students to process emotions and build connection, including creative, athletic, and experiential activities.
- Recognize that some students may be reluctant to trust school staff because of previous experiences with punishment, stigma, or being let down by adults. In these instances, building trust may require patience and consistency over time.
- Learn from and replicate models of behavioral health support that are already working well in some schools and communities.
- Differentiate mental and behavioral health supports based on students' individual circumstances and needs. For example, some students may be more likely to engage in conversation while participating in an activity like an art project or a sport, while others would prefer a face-to-face conversation in a quiet space.

## Conclusion

The insights and recommendations shared by members of California's OYCR Youth Advisory Board highlight the importance of designing school behavioral health infrastructure and supports that respond to students' lived experiences. For students who are most likely to be impacted by justice systems, positive adult relationships, supportive school environments, and timely access to behavioral health services can make a critical difference, potentially disrupting pathways that have historically led to justice systems involvement.

# Endnotes

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# Appendix A. The California Behavioral Health Student Services Act Evaluation

California's Behavioral Health Student Services Act aims to transform schools into **centers of wellness** by providing funding and support for partnerships between county behavioral health departments and local education agencies. Fifty-seven grantee partnerships across the state are implementing BHSSA-funded activities and services within a continuum of behavioral health initiatives that emphasize prevention and early intervention. To measure the implementation and impact of the BHSSA, WestEd is conducting a statewide evaluation that includes:



## **Community Engagement**

Ongoing engagement with a broad group of partners to foster youth empowerment and ongoing partner collaboration for collective data insights and learning



## **Contextual Descriptive Analysis**

Information about current behavioral health services and needs across the state



## **Process and Systems Change Analysis**

Results from a survey focused on BHSSA partnerships and school behavioral health systems paired with grant monitoring data shared by California's Commission for Behavioral Health



## **Grant Partnership Case Studies**

Stories from county behavioral health departments and local education agencies about how BHSSA funds were used to build partnerships and strengthen school behavioral health systems



## **School Case Studies**

Stories from behavioral health professionals, educators, families, and youth about the implementation and impact of BHSSA-funded activities and services on school behavioral health systems and student wellbeing

This report draws on the contextual descriptive analysis and community engagement components of the BHSSA Evaluation, centering youth voice in interpreting statewide data.

# Appendix B. California Healthy Kids Survey Questions

The survey data used in this report came from the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years, from students in grades 6–12, and reflects over 60% of districts across the state of California.

## School Connectedness

**Definition:** Percentage of students who responded “agree” or “strongly agree” in the CHKS to these statements:

- I feel close to people at/from this school.
- I am happy with/to be at this school.
- I feel like I am part of this school.
- The teachers at this school treat students fairly.
- I feel safe in my school.

## Social–Emotional Distress

**Definition:** Percentage of students who responded “pretty much true” or “very much true” in the CHKS to these statements:

Over the past 30 days, how true do you feel these statements are about you?

- I had a hard time relaxing.
- I felt sad and down.
- I was easily irritated.
- It was hard for me to cope, and I thought I would panic.
- It was hard for me to get excited about anything.

## High Expectations

**Definition:** Percentage of students who responded “pretty much true” or “very much true” in the CHKS to these statements:

There is a teacher or some adult at my school:

- Who tells me I do a good job
- Who always wants me to do my best
- Who believes that I will be a success

## Caring Adults

**Definition:** Percentage of students who responded “pretty much true” or “very much true” in the CHKS to these statements:

There is a teacher or some other adult at my school:

- Who really cares about me
- Who notices when I’m not there
- Who listens to me when I have something to say

## Optimism

**Definition:** Percentage of students who responded “pretty much true” or “very much true” in the CHKS to these statements:

- Each day I look forward to having a lot of fun.
- I usually expect to have a good day.
- Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad things.

## Mental Health–Related Absences

**Definition:** Percentage of students who responded “yes” to this question:

In the past 30 days, did you miss a day of school for any of the following reasons: felt very sad, hopeless, anxious, stressed, or angry?



The statewide Behavioral Health Student Services Act (BHSSA) Evaluation, led by WestEd in collaboration with California's Commission for Behavioral Health, aims to capture insights and experiences that will inform future funding, expand partnerships, strengthen systems, and ensure community needs are heard.

WestEd, a nonpartisan research, development, and service agency, works to promote excellence, improve learning, and increase opportunity for children, youth, and adults.

