Building School Behavioral Health Systems in Rural California: Lessons from the California Behavioral Health Student Services Act (BHSSA) Evaluation

Webinar Synopsis | October 20, 2026

In this webinar, county behavioral health and education leaders from Del Norte, Humboldt, Mono, and Siskiyou counties share how the Behavioral Health Student Services Act (BHSSA) is helping rural California communities strengthen their school behavioral health systems. Signed into law in 2019, the BHSSA funds partnerships between county behavioral health departments and education agencies to provide timely and equitable school behavioral health services.

Rural Counties at a Glance

The webinar opens with a brief look at BHSSA Evaluation data on California's 28 rural counties. Next, a moderated panel of county behavioral health and education leaders answers four questions: How has flexible BHSSA funding supported change? How have partnerships built on community strengths? How have counties addressed barriers to services? What would help sustain and expand services?

Key Themes

Flexible funding builds connected systems by:

- Combining many small grants into one connected system of care, from prevention to intensive supports and services
- Designing services around local needs and keeping prevention services in schools where they are most likely to be accessed
- Funding critical, nonclinical staff roles, such as billing staff and funding analysts, essential to developing sustainable infrastructure to fund services beyond any one grant

Strong partnerships rely on relationships and:

- Regular meetings where education and county behavioral health partners collaborate to build systems that better support students
- Written agreements that help formalize partnerships so they last beyond the knowledge of any one person
- Bringing more partners to the table, including neighboring counties, tribal partners, early childhood programs, child welfare, and staff who support foster youth and youth experiencing homelessness

Services for remote communities work best when they reach students in their own schools, which include:

- Mobile services, telehealth, and clinicians who travel to schools, so that students don't lose class time traveling to appointments
- Providers splitting their week between small remote schools and larger campuses
- Coordinated, responsive crisis support for schools, plus planning meetings that help students return to school with a clear plan following a hospital stay

Referral systems can leverage partnerships to close the referral loop by:

- Mapping local resources, including who they serve, how they can be accessed, and wait times
- Developing a coordinated referral process and reviewing referrals together each month
- Bridging services with telehealth while students wait for in-person care
- Making sure school staff and the community know what help is available and how to connect a student to it

Sustaining this work takes shared responsibility, including:

- A shared vision that leads to shared responsibility and resources, such as staff positions funded jointly by education and county behavioral health
- New funding sources and partners, such as billing insurance for services (including Medi-Cal), community health centers, tribal health providers, and universities that can help grow the local workforce
- Private spaces on campus for therapy and clear staff roles so students and families know whom to seek out for what

Examples of how youth voice has strengthened school behavioral health services in these communities include:

- Peer-led prevention programs, since young people leading their peers can have more impact than adults doing the work alone
- Youth advocates who speak on panels and at conferences
- Development of a county behavioral health board and a youth advisory board
- Youth focus groups and lunchtime spaces coordinated by wellness coaches

To learn more about the statewide BHSSA evaluation, visit wested.org/bhssaeval

Featured Speakers

Christine M. Gannon, LCSW
Behavioral Health System Administrator
Siskiyou County Behavioral Health

Lisa Howard
Coordinator of Continuous Improvement and County Community School Lead
Del Norte County Office of Education

Peter Stoll, PhD
Director of Prevention and Intervention Services
Humboldt County Office of Education

Lauren Wu
Program Manager
Mono County Behavioral Health

Session Hosts

Natalie Romer
Senior Program Associate and Co-Director of California's BHSSA Evaluation
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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.

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