

IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE & ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN CALIFORNIA

In 2011, 58 high schools in California received Safe and Supportive Schools (Cal-S3) grants from the California Department of Education (CDE) designed to improve poor school climates. After two years of program implementation, the majority of S3 schools improved not only their school climate but also student academic achievement, as measured by test scores. These schools serve as models for California's new Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) in terms of both goals and process.

California was one of eleven states selected by the US Department of Education to receive S3 funding. The participating high schools were drawn from districts with low-performing schools in 2010 and were selected based on their poor school climates, as measured by the *California Healthy Kids Survey* (CHKS). More than two-thirds (67.2%) of grantee schools scored below the state median Academic Performance Index (API) score. On average, 80% of students served by S3 schools were non-white and two-thirds were eligible for free/reduced-price meals.

A central feature of this project is the implementation of evidence-based action planning process, called *School Climate by Design*. The process began with a thorough needs assessment, drawing on data from CDE's suite of student (CHKS), staff, and parent surveys known collectively as the *California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys* (Cal-SCHLS).¹ Working with staff in the S3 Technical Assistance Center at WestEd, a team of teachers, administrators, students, and parents at each S3 school examined their data to identify strengths and needs, obtained student input through a Student Listening Circle, and then collaboratively developed a detailed Action Plan to improve school climate through evidence-based programs and practices. The value of this process is a common theme in the school success stories provided below.

SCHOOL CLIMATE IMPROVEMENTS

After two years of program implementation, 86% of grantees improved their school climates, as measured by a School Climate Index (SCI). The SCI summarizes CHKS data across eight school-climate domains or constructs, including school connectedness, developmental supports provided to students (e.g., caring adult relationships), and physical and emotional safety.²

The average SCI increased 12% (30 points), from 254 to 284 (the average across the state is 300), rising from the 10th to the 49th percentile. Among 16 (28%) of these schools, the increase was between 50 and 88 points.

1 Cal-SCHLS consists of the California Healthy Kids Survey, California School Climate Survey for staff, and California School Parent Survey. The surveys were developed by WestEd under contract from CDE. For more information, visit cal-schls.wested.org.

2 The 37 CHKS items used in calculating the School Climate Index assess truancy, caring adult relationships, high expectations, opportunities for meaningful participation, school connectedness, perceived safety, violence perpetration, bullying and other victimization, and substance use on school property. For more information about this index, see: Hanson, T. (2012, July). *Construction of California's School Climate Index (S3) for High Schools Participating in the Safe and Supportive Schools Program*. San Francisco: WestEd. Download: californias3.wested.org/resources/SCI_Methodology071712b.pdf

Almost all (95%) S3 schools reduced the level of violence, victimization (including bullying), and substance use at school. Reflecting these reductions, the overall subscale score for these indicators rose 21% (55 points), from 262 to 317. Gains in developmental supports, perceived school safety, and school connectedness were more modest (up 7 points for the subscale).

INCREASES IN ACHIEVEMENT

Student achievement was measured by the state's Academic Performance Index (API), based on annual standardized tests. Between 2011 and 2013, the overall API score across grantees increased 15 points, from 689 to 704.³ Individual grantee API scores improved from 4 to 74 points in 74% of S3 schools. One-third of schools (n=20) had increases of 20 points or more, and 25 schools (43%) had increases of 15 points or more. Of the one-quarter of schools that had the biggest improvements in their SCI (n=15), 67% (10 schools) increased their API by 14 to 57 points.

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THESE IMPROVEMENTS?

Summarized below are some observations made by the schools themselves about why these improvements occurred. Research is warranted to understand the factors that were most influential in bringing these improvements. On one level, it may be the requirement that each grantee develop a comprehensive plan with the following components:

- » A school-wide commitment to, and integration of, school climate into school improvement plans, including leadership by a School Climate Team of stakeholders (teachers, administrators, students, and parents).
- » Engaging in a systematic data-driven action planning process (School Climate by Design), beginning with an in-depth needs assessment (e.g., the Cal-SCHLS surveys) and incorporating student voice through a Student Listening Circle.
- » Developmental supports (caring adult relationships, high expectations, and meaningful participation) that research has identified as mitigating against existing risk factors, promoting resilience, and fostering positive academic, social-emotional, and healthy outcomes, including school connectedness.
- » A multi-tiered system of supports that provides universal strategies for all students but also includes interventions targeting high-risk populations, such as a student assistance process.
- » Implementation of evidence-based programs that address the needs identified by the assessment process.
- » Parent and community engagement.

One question raised by the results is why improvements were more positive in the domains of school violence perpetration, victimization, and substance use than for perceived safety, developmental supports, and con-

³ Note that the magnitude of changes in the API *cannot* be directly compared to the size of changes in the SCI. The two indices are calculated using different procedures, they measure different factors, and they likely differ in sensitivity to change.

nectedness? Several factors may account for this. First, the majority of districts made safety and implementing positive discipline and behavioral supports, including restorative practices, a top priority. Improving violence and victimization also involves changing the behavior of relatively few students and can be directly affected through changes in policies and practices. Improving connectedness and perceived supports involves more complex changes within the entire school culture and may require first changing the beliefs and behavior of adults. A longer time frame is required to measure improvements in these dimensions with self-report surveys. These are more lagging indicators, but they also may have a more profound effect in the long-term.

A MODEL FOR LOCAL CONTROL & ACCOUNTABILITY PLANNING

The Cal-S3 Project and the participating schools serve as a model for California school districts in developing an effective Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) in terms of both goals and process. Not only does the LCAP require that districts show how they will assess and address school climate, but school climate improvement is fundamentally important for achieving the other priorities that the legislation sets out. The goals of LCAP and Cal-S3 are aligned: engaging stakeholders in a process of using data to guide development of action plans to improve learning conditions, engagement, and performance. As these results show, the knowledge and experience of these S3 schools can provide a roadmap for other districts for how they can move forward to achieve this vision.⁴

⁴ Information about how Cal-SCHLS data can be used to guide LCAP development and monitoring can be downloaded at cal-schls.wested.org.

CDE CAL-S3 CONTACTS

Hilva Chan, Education Programs Consultant, (916) 319-0194 or hchan@cde.ca.gov

Donna Bezdecheck, Education Programs Consultant, (916) 319-0283 or dbezdech@cde.ca.gov

WESTED CONTACT

Gregory Austin, Director, Cal-S3 Technical Assistance Center, (562) 799-5155 or gaustin@wested.org

SCHOOL CLIMATE BY DESIGN

For more information about the School Climate by Design process or other technical assistance in improving school climate, call Meagan O'Malley, (562) 799-5421 or email schoolclimate@wested.org

STORIES FROM THE SCHOOLS

EL CAPITAN HIGH SCHOOL GROSSMONT UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Between 2011 and 2013, El Capitan saw a 22% (57-point) growth on their School Climate Index score and their school connectedness score increased 12% (33 points). Their API increased ten points between 2012 and 2013, from 737 to 747. There is a consensus among the S3 School Climate Team that two factors were most important to their success: (1) data drove their decision-making and progress monitoring from the inception of the grant; and (2) the School Climate Action Planning process prompted staff, students, and parents to begin a dialogue about, and commitment to, the importance of school climate. Rarely discussed three years ago, school climate conversations now abound between staff members, students, and parents at El Capitan.

When their Cal-SCHLS data indicated a significant need to improve student perceptions of school connectedness, the S3 School Climate Team crafted a comprehensive work plan and implemented programs such as Link Crew and Camp LEAD (a leadership and youth development camp that brings together staff members as well as students from all grade levels, social groups, and ethnic backgrounds). In addition, the school established a “reflections” room where students with discipline referrals meet individually with a supportive staff member to reflect on and discuss behavior.

MOUNT MIGUEL HIGH SCHOOL GROSSMONT UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Mount Miguel’s SCI increased 16 points and its API 35 points (to 289 and 694, respectively). School staff emphasize the value of implementing the Capturing Kids’ Hearts (CKH) program. A three-day training was attended by 100 of the school’s classified, certificated, and administrative staff. The outcomes of this training included:

- » Developing safe, trusting, self-managing classrooms;
- » Improving classroom attendance by building students’ motivation and helping them take responsibility for their actions and performance;
- » Decreasing delinquent behaviors such as disruptive outbursts, violent acts, drug use and other risky behavior;
- » Utilizing the EXCEL Model™ and reinforcing the role of emotional intelligence in teaching; and
- » Developing students’ empathy for diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Following this training, Mount Miguel’s four-week discipline referrals fell to 37 compared to 156 the same month the previous year. The S3 Coordinator reports that the impact of the CKH training on the staff and students has been profound.

LYNWOOD HIGH SCHOOL LYNWOOD UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Lynwood High has made impressive gains in school climate and academic achievement since 2011–2012. The SCI increased 41% (75 points). The school's API score increased 43 points; CAHSEE pass and proficiency rates rose significantly; and graduation rates increased. Both on-campus substance use and violence rates decreased. Additionally, school developmental supports (high expectations for students, caring relationships, opportunities for meaningful participation) improved. The school attributes much of that success to the implementation of a school-wide implementation of a positive behavior support program that includes student and staff recognition assemblies, parent support groups, and administration receptive to staff concerns and new ideas.

PACIFICA HIGH SCHOOL OXNARD UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, VENTURA COUNTY

Pacifica High School has seen a 22-point (8%) increase in their SCI and an increase of 15 points in their API since 2011. PHS attributes these strong gains to the commitment of staff to “Encourage the Heart” by continuously and compassionately working with their students to hold themselves to high standards of excellence, both behaviorally as well as academically, including improving their API to 805. Celebrations and recognition of students commenced with the freshmen, sophomore, and junior classes of the 2010–2011 school year and included celebrations for students who showed gains, band jumps, and number of proficiency met over the course of three years. This positive approach to letting students know the importance of doing well on these high stakes testing practices was designed to encourage a growth mindset amongst students and staff. Positive behavioral supports were also implemented (including CHAMPS/ACHIEVE, START on TIME) and the school communicated clear, concise expectations regarding dress code, attendance, punctuality, and how to be successful. The school strove to set forth clear standards and articulate these with students; expect the best from students and let them know they can do their absolute best; pay attention to the growth within students and celebrate growth personally and school wide; and celebrate a caring, trusting environment. As articulated by the school principal, “Encourage the Heart is not something we do ... it is something we need to continuously become. We need to be who we want our students to be.”

SAN JUAN HIGH SCHOOL SAN JUAN UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, SACRAMENTO COUNTY

San Juan High School's SCI improved 33% (87 points) since baseline, and its API by 51 points. Suspensions dropped from 389 to 133. The school attributes much of this improvement to the implementation of restorative practices. Looking at suspension rates and CHKS data from the previous two years, the School Climate Team determined it needed to decrease suspensions and improve safety. The S3 Coordinator and 14 students attended a three-day workshop facilitated by the Restorative Justice Training Institute (Oakland, CA) and developed Restorative Justice Advocacy (RJA) to improve school climate and culture by specifically addressing conflict and harms committed on campus. A key strategy implemented by the RJA students was the utilization of Reconciliation Circles that addressed conflict between students before it escalated by establishing the root cause and engaging in restorative conversations. These Circles also have been used to “reintegrate” students who have been suspended due to fighting.

MADERA HIGH SCHOOL MADERA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, MADERA COUNTY

Madera increased its SCI by 15% (36 points) and its API by 15 points. Their data led the S3 Team to establish a Peer Counseling Program to support those students who reported they felt they didn't have anyone to turn to, they needed help with problem solving, or they wanted to feel like someone at school cared about them. In response, 24 students received training to build their knowledge, motivation, and skills to positively influence their lives as well as the lives of those around them. These young leaders began making "a huge cultural shift" at the school and helped empower students to solve problems.

ARTHUR A. BENJAMIN HEALTH PROFESSIONS HIGH SCHOOL SACRAMENTO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, SACRAMENTO COUNTY

Health Professions High School's SCI improved 23% (55 points) and its API by 51 points. The school attributes much of this improvement to reviewing CHKS and suspension data and focusing on improving school culture. The S3 School Climate Team determined the school needed to decrease suspensions and improve campus safety. It implemented the Safe School Ambassadors program, which trains a diverse group of student leaders to resolve conflicts, defuse incidents, and support isolated and excluded students. Adults were also trained as program mentors, who lead regular group meetings of the Ambassadors to provide time to strengthen skills and sustain commitment to the program. In addition, the entire staff, faculty, and administration received Single School Culture Training to ensure all adults in the school are on the same page for expectations related to academics, behavior, and school climate. Staff training included strategies for promoting emotional safety and developing common norms.

KENNEDY HIGH SCHOOL RICHMOND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, WEST CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Kennedy's API score increased by 74 points. As highlighted in an article in the *Contra Costa Times* (10/24/13), the persistently low-performing Kennedy High School "is staging a comeback." Although its SCI has yet to increase, according to one teacher interviewed for the newspaper article, "the biggest change he has seen at the school is the environment." Using their Cal-SCHLS data, Kennedy focused on a number of needs: improving school spirit, safety, and positive discipline; better peer relationships and lower conflict (by implementing restorative practice techniques); clearer and higher expectations; teacher collaboration and involvement in decision-making; and parent involvement.

School staff emphasize the importance of student involvement in analyzing CHKS data and addressing the identified needs. Kennedy formed a Youth Policy Group (YPG) to promote youth leadership, raise student awareness and understanding of school policies and practices, and make youth voice matter in school improvement. After witnessing how the school used CHKS results to make decisions about school programs, policies, and even resources, the YPG decided all Kennedy High students needed to take the survey more seriously. YPG members (primarily juniors and seniors) visited each freshman classroom to explain why it's important for students to take the CHKS and complete it thoughtfully. Daily announcements over the PA system for two weeks reminded students that their participation in the CHKS was an opportunity to influence positive changes at the school.