

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM CALIFORNIA'S SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS PROJECT

The California Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools Project (CalS3) emphasized building the capacity of its 58 grantee high schools to engage in a stakeholder-led, data-driven process of targeted school climate improvement using research-informed strategies. The participating high schools, the majority of which served low-income, high-minority communities, were identified based on their low baseline school climates, as measured by the California Healthy Kids Survey's School Climate Index (SCI).<sup>1</sup> Grantees were asked to:

- » Conduct a **comprehensive assessment** and use that data to develop a detailed action plan implementing evidence-based practice to address the identified needs.
- » Foster a **school-wide commitment** to school climate improvement and integrate school climate into overall school reform efforts under the guidance of a School Climate Team.
- » **Engage all stakeholders**, including students, staff, family members, and the community.
- » Implement universal **youth development** strategies, particularly three developmental supports — caring adult relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation — that research has linked to positive academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

- » Implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions for high-risk populations and individuals as part of a **Multi-Tiered System of Supports**.

Evidence from four years of data collection suggests that the CalS3 project and its overall approach were a success. The average grantee School Climate Index (SCI) grew by 20 percentile points over the course of the four-year project. In 2011, on average, S3 grantee schools had lower SCI scores than 79 percent of schools in the state, compared to 58 percent in 2014. This indicates that the CalS3 framework should be considered a model for school climate improvement efforts statewide as part of Local Control and Accountability Plans.

Over the course of the CalS3 project, California Department of Education gained valuable insights into strategies within the CalS3 framework that work effectively to improve school climate in some of the most challenged high schools in the state. The remainder of this brief summarizes six of the key lessons learned:

1. Go Slow to Move Fast
2. School Leaders Set the Tone
3. Empower Adults and Connect with Young People
4. Focus on Norms First
5. Prioritize Meaningful Actions and “Quick Wins”
6. Changing Relationships and Engagement Takes Time and Commitment

<sup>1</sup>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: [http://californias3.wested.org/resources/SCI\\_Methodology071712b.pdf](http://californias3.wested.org/resources/SCI_Methodology071712b.pdf)

## Six Key Lessons from CalS3

### 1. *Go Slow to Move Fast*

Commitment to a comprehensive planning process—including a prolonged initial planning stage and regular reflection throughout the grant period—was critical to the success of CalS3 schools. During the first grant year, the initial planning stage occurred using a deliberate and systematic approach, beginning with the identification of the school’s climate-related strengths and needs and concluding with the development of a thorough multi-year school climate action plan. Grantees consistently highlight the value of this process for focusing efforts where need was greatest, guiding decision-making, and building stakeholder buy-in.

Identifying their climate-related strengths and needs required several layers of data collection and analysis by CalS3 Schools. The following tools and practices were used:

- » **California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey System (Cal-SCHLS).** All grantees annually surveyed staff, students, and family members using CDE’s Cal-SCHLS surveys. These surveys provided data on the needs, concerns, and strengths of the whole school community –across all major domains of school climate and related learning barriers and supports and allowed schools to compare perceptions about the status of these areas across stakeholder groups.
- » **Student Listening Circles.** All grantees held a Student Listening Circle (SLC), a facilitated focus-group process that engages and supports students to share with adults their experiences, perspectives, and ideas on improving school climate. The SLC provided a forum for students to collaborate with adults in prioritizing action items for school climate improvement that truly meet their needs.
- » **Strategic Planning for School Climate Improvement.** CalS3 grantees felt that one of the most effective components of the project was engaging in the process of drilling down into their various sources of school climate data in order to develop detailed, evidence-based Action Plans. In year one of their projects, grantees invited stakeholders to day-long Data Use Action Planning Workshops, facilitated by CalS3 technical assistance providers. During these workshops, grantees mapped their data-supported needs and matched those needs to evidence-based strategies, including universal youth development and interventions for at-risk youth.

After the initial planning stage, all CalS3 grantees engaged in reflection periods at least annually. Reflection included reexamination of Cal-SCHLS data as well as monitoring of implementation fidelity. Grantees regularly (i.e., at least quarterly) examined whether they were fully implementing their School Climate Action Plan as it was originally conceived. The CalS3 evaluation found this process to be extremely important to predicting school climate improvement; 80 percent of schools that were in the top quartile of School Climate Action Plan implementation had a better than average gain in School Climate Index over the course of the grant.



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## 2. *School Leaders Set the Tone*

The most successful CalS3 schools were those that benefited from idea champions--individuals who not only promote an idea, innovation, or program through encouragement and recognition, but also work in practical ways to nurture these strategies to fruition--at the district and site levels.

- » **District Support.** Although the CalS3 grant was funded through the district, and a district representative was required to attend grantee meetings, district involvement varied greatly across grantees. CalS3 schools in supportive school districts were able to swiftly implement their School Climate Action Plans with help from district personnel in reducing bureaucratic red tape, identifying braided funding opportunities, modifying policies, and supporting professional development and accountability mechanisms. District support was also essential for CalS3 schools to achieve long-term, sustainable success by ensuring continuity when school staff members changed positions and for by fostering alliances with community partners.
  
- » **The Principal as Change Agent.** A clear relationship between the level of principal involvement and school-wide commitment was evident among CalS3 grantees. Fundamental changes to culture and climate occurred in CalS3 schools where the principal was engaged and invested. Effective CalS3 principals:
  - Developed and articulated a shared vision and mission around the importance of building a supportive, engaging, developmentally supportive, and healthy learning environment;
  - Provided teachers and staff with the training and professional development they needed to effectively implement the program action plan; and
  - Held staff accountable for fostering and modeling positive behavior and conditions.
  
- » **The School Climate Team.** To be in compliance with the grant, CalS3 grantees were required to form School Climate Teams for the purpose of guiding grant implementation over time. Some schools built more effective teams than others. The CalS3 teams that most effectively steered their schools toward measurable improvements in school climate were comprised of idea champions from diverse stakeholder groups who:
  - Were centrally and formally involved in raising awareness about the importance of school climate among members of the school community;
  - Were responsible for both the visioning of and the day-to-day management of program development and implementation;
  - Took ownership over communicating program progress to stakeholders; and
  - Were able to influence the reduction or elimination of barriers and challenges that were both internal and external to the school organization.

### 3. *Empower Adults and Connect with Young People*

In order to achieve meaningful and sustainable school climate improvement, successful CalS3 schools worked to cultivate a shared mission, created and sustained by students, school staff, families, and community members. They were strategic in terms of how they invested in staff members, families, and young people. All the stakeholders in the school community were engaged in all stages of the process in order to raise awareness of students' school climate-related needs, determine how best to meet those needs, and gain engaged commitment to support and sustain their efforts.

- » **Investing In Staff.** The value of staff members' role in school climate improvement cannot be understated. Indeed, over 70% of CalS3 schools with the highest levels of staff engagement had above-average gains on overall school climate scores. A key lesson is that issues of staff climate and culture need to be addressed early. If the working climate is poor and staff morale is low — if teachers don't feel supported, respected, or connected to the school — they won't be engaged in their work and won't be able to provide the supports and model the competencies students need. CalS3 schools found creative ways to engage staff, including providing high-quality, motivating, and empowering professional development opportunities on school climate strategies that paid off in improving program buy-in, implementation, and sustainability. These trainings addressed:
  - Building engaging learning environments
  - Cultivating positive relationships with colleagues and students
  - Effectively engaging young people in school decision-making
  - Promoting social and emotional learning and other youth development strategies
  - Managing stress and conflict
- » **Connecting with Youth.** The investments CalS3 schools made to encourage adults to build healthy, nurturing connections with youth paid off. When students at CalS3 schools were interviewed in focus groups about their experiences, over 80% of the groups reported that, overall, the adults at their schools have higher expectations as a result of CalS3 efforts, and nearly 75% of the groups agreed that there are more caring relationships between students and staff. Students report observing higher frequencies of adults being visible throughout the school; adults opening their rooms to students during free periods; adults being more friendly and supportive, both personally and academically; and adults being more likely to intervene in cases of bullying or fighting. Create a continuum of sanctions that have meaningful implications for students, rather than serving to isolate them from the school community. For example, provide restorative opportunities, such as opportunities to provide community service.
- » **Involving Families is Challenging, but Worth the Effort.** For CalS3 grantees, parent engagement was characterized by two primary components: (a) development of opportunities for meaningful parent involvement in the program and recruitment into it, and (b) development of strategies to make parents feel welcomed and supported at school. In general, grantees found parent engagement to be one of the most challenging aspects of the CalS3 project. Despite the fact that no 'silver bullet' was identified for engaging parents, over half of CalS3 grantee schools reported that their strategic efforts to transform parent engagement were worthwhile for improving school climate. .

#### 4. Focus on Norms First

Effective, sustainable change in school climate begins by focusing on the norms governing how school community members interact with one another on a daily basis. All grantees were asked to select evidence-based strategies with an eye toward how those strategies would improve the day-to-day experience of students, staff, and family members when interacting within the school environment. CDE encouraged grantees to build pro-social, pro-climate, school-wide norms and expectations that were:

- Agreed upon and implemented by all staff,
- Used to align and guide all practice and procedures,
- Clearly communicated to students and understood by them, and
- Consistently taught, modeled, coached and enforced by all adults.

To obtain tools and techniques for examining school norms effectively, CalS3 grantees received training in implementing *Single School Culture*<sup>2</sup>, a process designed to intentionally create a foundation of shared norms and expectations that are clearly communicated and result in consistency in administrator, teacher, and student behavior.

In ninety percent of CalS3 schools, rule or policy changes resulted from the systematic analysis of school norms. Policies related to student discipline were the most frequently modified due to the fact that existing exclusionary discipline policies were undermining the intentional norms being created around connectedness and trust. Common changes included replacing out-of-school suspension with other alternatives and recognizing students for social, emotional, and behavioral accomplishments.

#### 5. Prioritize Meaningful Actions and “Quick Wins”

Identify a few key problems that could be addressed relatively easily in a short time-period while making an observable difference in the school environment. School turnaround research further emphasizes the importance of making clear and visible improvement quickly (i.e., quick wins). Acting swiftly on their schools’ most tractable challenges helped CalS3 schools:

- Focus collective efforts;
- Demonstrate that change is possible when staff and students work together;
- Rally staff and students around school climate improvement efforts, generating enthusiasm to work together, overcoming resistance and inertia, and fostering consensus, collegiality, and participation; and
- Set the tone and conditions to build on, making long-term and more difficult change more realistic.

<sup>2</sup>Adler, Alison (2015). *Single School Culture*. Available at: <http://californias3.wested.org/singleschool>

## 6. *Changing Relationships and Engagement Takes Time and Commitment*

As the project's name reflected, CalS3 had two major thrusts: (1) to foster safety and address disruptive behaviors in school—such as bullying, harassment and violence, and substance use on campus that undermined it, and (2) to promote caring, engaging, and healthy school environments that foster learning and well-being among both students and staff. Evaluation results suggested that the former came to fruition more quickly than the latter. Among CalS3 high schools, nearly all of the school climate gains were made in the area of violence, victimization, and substance use reduction. Relational supports and engagement, on the other hand, remained statistically unchanged during the grant period overall. These divergent findings may be explained by two factors. First, the majority of grantees made safety and implementing positive discipline and behavioral supports, including restorative practices, their top priority. Many CalS3 schools demonstrated significant school-wide changes to school discipline policies and systems and anti-bullying programs were in wide adoption. Second, improving violence and victimization is relatively easier. It involves changing the behavior of relatively few students and can be directly affected through changes in policies, practices, and programs, whereas improving connectedness, relationships, and other developmental supports is less familiar terrain and involves more complex changes within the entire school culture, including the beliefs and behavior of adults. Increasing high expectations, building caring relationships, enhancing meaningful participation for students, and generally building school connectedness will not happen in a single year; it requires a sustained and concerted multi-year effort to change the behavior of all adults on campus. This is especially challenging in high schools where there are large staffs and students generally have direct contact with six or more adults each day. Nevertheless, one CalS3 grantee that made supports and engagement a high priority — San Juan High School — showed among the largest improvements in the School Climate Index in the state, as described in What Works Brief #14.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR SCHOOL CLIMATE IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS IN CALIFORNIA

Improvements in School Climate Index scores for CalS3 high schools suggest that the CalS3 framework should be considered a model for school climate improvement and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) efforts statewide. The six key lessons learned outlined in this brief should be used to further guide these efforts. Under the leadership of their school boards, superintendents, and site principals, school districts wishing to leverage the CalS3 model should undertake a stakeholder-engaged, data-driven process organized to develop a thorough and strategic school climate improvement plan. One of the overarching lessons gleaned from CalS3 is that effective school climate improvement doesn't require a large outlay of money. It does require commitment and investment of time and effort in the process described in this brief.

The LCAP requirements to make school climate and pupil engagement a priority provide a unique opportunity for school districts to refine their school climate-related policies and practices. CalS3 serves as a template for doing so.

For additional information about the California S3 program and resources to support school climate improvement in all schools, visit the S3 website: <http://californias3.wested.org>.

What Works Brief #14 describes how one high school implemented many of the lessons described here.

The full *Safe and Supportive Schools Program, 2014/15 Statewide Evaluation Results, Final Year Findings* can be found on the S3 website: [http://californias3.wested.org/resources/S3FinalEvalReport\\_2013-14.pdf](http://californias3.wested.org/resources/S3FinalEvalReport_2013-14.pdf).

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