

# A CASE STUDY OF SAN JUAN HIGH SCHOOL'S SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS PROJECT

## OVERVIEW

California was one of eleven states that received in 2011 a federally-funded Safe and Supportive Schools grant (S3). The California Department of Education selected 58 high schools within the state to receive the grant, based on need as indicated by low academic performance and scores on a School Climate Index (SCI) derived California Healthy Kids Survey data.

San Juan High School, a low-performing, low-income, ethnically-diverse school in San Juan Unified School District, demonstrated consistent gains in its School Climate Index (SCI).<sup>1</sup> Over the three years of program implementation (2011/12-2013/14), the school's SCI percentile rating among all high schools in the state increased from 40 to 78.

What factors might have contributed to this success? This case study reflects on the programs and strategies that they implemented and draws upon extensive data collected as part of the program's evaluation. Overall, it would appear that one key to San Juan's success was the degree to which it embraced the CalS3 framework and mission and it effectively implemented its programmatic Action Plan, as well as many of the strategies and practices summarized in the Lessons Learned from the CalS3 Project. See What Works Brief #13.

## THE PROJECT FRAMEWORK

CDE tasked the schools with creating a positive school climate that engages youth in learning, promotes positive development and well-being, and creates conditions for success in school, career, and life. The S3 project framework required a school-wide commitment to these goals and their integration into school improvement efforts under the leadership of a School Climate Team, a systematic process of using data to identify needs and develop a detailed Action Plans that systematically addressed those needs, youth development opportunities, targeted interventions for at-risk groups and individuals as part of

Grantees were provided technical assistance in undergoing a comprehensive assessment and developing an Action Plan that implemented evidence-based programs and/or strategies and detailed activities, staff responsibilities, and timeless for completing each task. The needs assessment included data from the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys of students, staff, and parents (Cal-SCHLS), a Student Listening Circle to add Student Voice to the process, the Site Strategic Plan, discipline data, and a review of existing school improvement efforts.

<sup>1</sup>The CalS3 School Climate Index (SCI) is a global, school-level measure based on California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) results for eight domains of school climate organized into two categories — Supports and Engagement (45%); Violence, Victimization, & Substance Use at School (45%) — as well as Truancy Incident data (10%). A modified version of the SCI can now be calculated for any school in California participating in the CHKS.

### San Juan High School Profile 2014-15

- 712 Students
- 70 percent of the students are socio economically disadvantaged,
- 14 percent are English Language Learners
- 20 percent are Students with Disability.
- 11 percent are African American, 32 percent Hispanic, and 49 percent white.

#### THE SCHOOL'S APPROACH

After careful review of their site data, San Juan determined that it needed to place a major focus on creating a safer, more developmentally supportive, and engaging school environment for students that would build positive relationships between and among adults and students, foster social-emotional as well as cognitive competence, and promote a sense of student ownership and connectedness.

A major factor in its success was that it embraced the spirit and goals of the project through strong leadership and commitment. Both the Principal and the S3 Coordinator were “idea champions,” the program was well-integrated into other school improvement efforts, and there was clear, concise communication with staff, students, and parents about the importance of the program and the school’s expectations for success, as well as an intentional fostering of a high level of stakeholder involvement. The school leadership worked to overcome initial resistance among some staff and promote broad-based buy-in.

Reflecting this commitment, San Juan implemented programs with a high degree of fidelity, provided needed training for staff and students, and monitored their progress, as recommended by implementation science.

Another factor was focusing on what was most important. Reflecting on the greatest challenge in program implementation, Principal Irvin notes, “At the beginning, the work plan was too ambitious, and the ideas were bigger than the capacity of the school and the partnerships.” Overtime, however, workplan and strategies were refined, focused on the school’s top priorities, and aligned with its capacity.

Listen to what principal Gloria Ervin has to say about the importance of improving school climate and their efforts at San Juan High School in the Alliance for Education Solution’s video *Leading with Heart, Principals Whose Schools Succeed*, which can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzpZtffbAql&feature=youtu.be>

#### SOME STRATEGIES IMPLEMENTED

**Stakeholder Engagement and Student Voice.** The Principal reported that one of the most important strategies the school implemented was an emphasis on stakeholder involvement. San Juan expanded the required School Climate Team, designed to provide leadership in implementing the S3 grant, into a Community Stakeholders Collaborative and placed particular emphasis on student “voice,” building on the Listening Circle process. In the course of action planning, the school came to recognize that a high level of expenditures was not needed to change the conditions for learning. What was important was to make a true investment in the students to become active contributing members to the school community through ownership and accountability and to believe that every member of the school community should contribute to the path of improvement. There was a high level of communication and transparency with all stakeholders, including reporting back to the community and parents regarding progress. The school worked to create and maintain community partnerships in order to support its school improvement efforts.

**Social Emotional Learning.** All freshman health classes implemented Life Skills Training, a research-validated program designed to reduce substance use and other risky behaviors. This approach, which targeted major social and psychological factors that promote the initiation of risky behaviors, provided students with the skills and confidence to successfully handle challenging situations.

**Freshman Mentoring.** Upper classmen (approximately 40) were trained as mentors to support 9th grade transition and empower in-coming students to make positive choices, form positive relationships, and build a strong community through mentoring partnerships, school events, and opportunities to meet throughout the year.

**Restorative Justice.** Restorative justice practices and a Peer Judicial Panel were implemented as an integrated student accountability system, an alternative to suspension or behavioral referrals for target students, and a bullying prevention strategy. Students were selected to be part of an initial committee to review current school rules and provide input regarding changing and updated policy and setting consequences. search-based framework that can be relied upon for identifying at-risk youth using teacher teams.

**Project Based Learning.** Selected teachers were professionally trained on Project Based Learning (PBL) and how to coach other staff in this approach. All staff were required to integrate one project into their lesson plans each semester. They were also expected to include service components to increase academic and community connections among students. Staff engagement in program activities was difficult at first. However, with concentrated efforts by both the Principal and the S3 Coordinator, staff buy-in increased greatly over time.

**Intervention Efforts.** As part of developing a Multi-tiered System of Supports, a clearly-defined referral system was created for high-risk groups and youth that aimed to ensure that the students were being referred to appropriate programs or interventions to receive recommended services.

### WHAT STUDENTS HAD TO SAY

In focus groups held as part of the project evaluation, students reported that, as a result of these programmatic efforts, they had seen many positive changes on campus. These included reduced incidents of violence (fights), discouraged use of alcohol and drugs, less tension, and higher expectations overall from adults at the school. One student reported the following: “My freshmen year there were so many fights and the Restorative Justice program has really changed our environment. Being a part of the RJ circles has taught me better ways to communicate and think through my own perspective and issues as well.” Another noted, “Being a mentor has really helped me help other students...becoming more connected with people has helped me feel more well rounded.”

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