



Leveraging Community Schools to Improve Access to Health Services in California

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States are increasingly exploring innovative policy options — like community schools — as a strategy to not only foster supportive school and classroom environments, but to also [address disparities](#) in access to comprehensive health services for students. Inequitable access to healthcare has only been exacerbated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and schools still struggle to provide students with adequate health services that address their mental, emotional and behavioral well-being.

According to the 2022 [YouthTruth survey](#), about 50% of middle school students and 56% of high school students reported depression, stress or anxiety as major obstacles to their learning. Such disorders can affect students' concentration and energy levels, which is linked to school dropout, absenteeism lower academic performance and behavioral issues in the classroom.

Additionally, [research](#) indicates that 70% of public schools across the country reported increases in the percentage of students who have sought out mental health services in school since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially true among students of color, students who receive special education and students from low-income backgrounds.

To address these challenges, the U.S. Department of Education has gradually increased federal funding for the Full-Service Community Schools Program — reaching historic highs of \$150 million in 2023. Additionally, some states provide funding for the expansion of community schools alongside federal grant opportunities and include components of the [Whole Child Education](#) framework that incorporates academic, cognitive, social and emotional, identity development and mental and physical health services in a child's educational experiences.

State Policy Strategies in California

In **California**, students' mental health challenges mirror the national context described above. These challenges have encouraged the state to make some of the largest appropriations in support of community schools with the intent of providing equitable wraparound supports. The

state especially targets support for students experiencing homelessness or in foster care, students from low-income backgrounds and/or students from historically excluded racial and ethnic groups.

In 2021, the California State Legislature passed the [California Community Schools Partnership Act](#), which established the [California Community Schools Partnership Program](#) (CCSPP) that focuses on mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student health. It also provides various grant opportunities for the development and expansion of community schools. During fiscal year 2021-22, nearly \$3 billion was allocated from the general fund to CCSPP to make grant funds available until 2031. Through the program, local education agencies can apply for planning, implementation or expansion grants that are distributed based on the unduplicated percentage of students who are English learners, in foster care, or eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The program also provides technical assistance through eight [regional technical assistance centers](#), a [state transformative assistance center](#) and [county offices of education](#), all of which receive their own funding grants.

Following this legislation, [Proposition 98](#) provided CCSPP an additional \$1.1 billion in the 2022-23 budget plan to expand resources for community schools and establish a formative evaluation process for reporting student outcomes. The California State Board of Education approved the [California Community School Framework](#) and Gov. Gavin Newsom released his [Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health](#) in 2022 that included \$4.7 billion toward increasing access to mental health services for individuals from birth through age 25 across the state. The plan focuses on de-stigmatizing mental healthcare, providing adequate resources for the prevention and treatment of mental health disorders and creating a virtual platform for students to receive services. The Office of Gov. Newsom has maintained support for community schools and encourages work across agencies to provide students with resources for improvement.

Outcomes and Progress

As required by the community schools partnership legislation, grant recipients and regional technical assistance centers must provide program and expenditure data to the state department of education. Local superintendents also must develop and administer annual formative evaluations beginning in 2023, continuing through 2031 when the final comprehensive report will be due. These evaluations will include student outcome data, analysis of services provided and evidence of best practices and strategies. This data will allow for more accurate tracking of the impact of community schools and the link between services and student outcomes.

Despite limited statewide data on outcomes in the short-term, some schools and districts illustrate the potential success of community schools. As an example, the [Social Justice Humanitas Academy](#) in the Los Angeles Unified School District was founded as a community school in 2011 and has since [produced](#) promising academic, physical, mental and emotional outcomes among students. This community school partners with a mobile health clinic that offers physical and mental health services and a community services provider for crisis intervention and individual, group and family therapy for students.

Community schools offer a unique opportunity to promote health equity in school environments. As California scales its program to reach more students and families, identifying exemplars and best practices can help ensure the greatest impact for underserved communities. Collecting comprehensive data in a continuous evaluation process will be a key factor in assessing program impact across student groups and ensuring that services are equitably accessible to families.