

# STORIES FROM THE FIELD



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## San Diego Unified School District | San Diego, CA

*The Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative's (CYBHI) Stories from the Field series aims to highlight the critical work being done to address the behavioral health needs of children and youth, as well as the ongoing efforts to improve systems and create sustainable change. These stories showcase the values and vision of the Initiative through personal experiences, composite stories, and audiocasts and demonstrate how the CYBHI can build on existing efforts, learn from them, and work towards scalable and systemic change.*

*Learn more about this work and listen to all of the audiocasts in this series at [add cybhi url placeholder here].*

### **BUILDING EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE WELLNESS SUPPORTS FOR ALL STUDENTS THROUGH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS**

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) is an urban school district located in southern California that serves an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse student population of over 121,000 students in preschool through grade 12. The district has worked hard to make its schools hubs where students and their families can access the resources that they need to thrive. The district has a long-standing partnership with the San Diego County Behavioral Health Services Department to provide appropriate clinical supports for students in local schools who are eligible for Medi-Cal (California's Medicaid program) or who receive mental and behavioral health services through individualized education programs (IEPs).

In recent years, the district has pursued an ambitious Wellness Initiative to improve student well-being, focused on making these and other supports accessible to all students. The backbone of these efforts has been the development of several strategic partnerships with community-based clinical service providers. These



relationships have not only improved schools' ability to refer students for clinical mental health care in the community but have also enabled schools to embed impactful mental and behavioral health supports on campus.

### **An Intentional Approach to Partnership**

SDUSD contracts with seven different partners to serve the mental and behavioral health needs of its students. The relationship with each partner has been carefully designed and formalized through memoranda of understanding (MOUs) to provide clarity about the services that are available to students and to enable consistent, two-way communication between schools and provider agencies about student referrals that is in full compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. The district has also worked closely with all seven partner agencies to develop a common referral form, which is intended to simplify the referral process for families and school staff.

### **Leveraging School-Based Wellness Centers as Hubs for Student Support**

SDUSD has developed a network of school-based wellness centers that serve as hubs across the district for supporting student well-being. The centers prioritize creating safe, inclusive spaces for students to access wellness

services and supports. As Danielle Octon, SDUSD Wellness Center Coordinator, shared, "If you're a student and you come into the center, it's a safe, inclusive, non-judgmental space."

Further, the wellness centers are co-created with students so that the centers are truly spaces for students by students. As Octon shared, "Our spaces [are] created with our youth. They have ownership in this space. So, we create collective agreements together. We want them to feel like this space is theirs and it's a place [where] they have ownership."

### **Connecting Students With Appropriate Supports Through a Tiered System**

SDUSD has designed a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS)<sup>1</sup> that has helped to ensure that each student receives the type of support that is right for them. As Marlon Morgan, founder and CEO of Wellness Together, notes, "[MTSS] is something that is taken very seriously in . . . San Diego Unified School District. [MTSS is] very helpful for us because it means that the referrals made to our program are appropriate, and the more appropriate the referral, the better fit for service, the better the student will do."

However, it can be difficult for school staff to determine which students will benefit most from each tier of support. In response to this challenge, the district has been working with counselors in the schools to develop a decision tree for school staff to use

in deciding which type of support to refer their students to. As part of the new, county-led Screening to Care initiative, SDUSD middle schools also plan to begin using a dedicated mental health screening tool to guide referral decisions for student mental and behavioral health care.

### **The Impact of SDUSD's Wellness Initiative**

SDUSD Wellness Center Coordinator Rasheeda Rashada discussed how some students and families have previously encountered systems that did not serve them, or did not serve them well. Rashada also explained how SDUSD wellness efforts—including the district's wellness centers—are dedicated to restoring relationships of trust and support: "We create a positive impact on [students] and . . . show them there are people here who truly care, who are truly going to help you from A to Z . . . and really provide that safe space."

Further, SDUSD students are learning key skills to support their mental health and well-being and are demonstrating increased agency and voice as a result of the wellness supports offered by the district. As Rashada shared, "Students have been able to become empowered and have a voice and just learn proper coping skills [for] what they're dealing with." Rashada notes that SDUSD's wellness supports have helped "give students a sense of agency."

<sup>1</sup> MTSS is a comprehensive framework that aligns academic, behavioral, social, and emotional learning and mental health supports in a fully integrated system of support for the benefit of all students. See the Orange County Department of Education's [California MTSS Framework](#) webpage for more information.

“We definitely look at what universal supports we are providing [and] which community organizations are able to do that, that our students and families are familiar with. And then, ‘Who do we need to reach out to in the district and bring programs in to supplement? What are those secondary and third layers, those targeted and more intense supports we have? Who’s providing them? How often can they be provided? What is our data showing?’”

— Danielle Octon, Wellness Center Coordinator at SDUSD

**TABLE 1. SAN DIEGO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT INFORMATION**

<b>Number of students served in 2021-22</b>	<b>95,233</b>
Geographic setting	Urban
Grades served	K-12

**TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHICS OF STUDENTS SERVED IN SDUSD**

<b>Student demographic</b>	<b>Percentage served</b>
Latinx	44.6%
Asian	9.6%
Black or African American	7.4%
Native American	0.2%
Filipino	4.8%
Multiracial	8.8%
White	23.6%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.4%
Students with disabilities	14.8%
English language learners	19%
Foster youth	0.2%
Unhoused youth	6.4%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	55.9%

Note: Data sourced from the [California School Dashboard](#).



### Questions to consider while you listen . . .

- San Diego Unified School District and its partners have designed a common referral form to streamline and simplify the referral process for students, families, and school staff. The district is also creating a decision-tree tool to help school staff refer students to appropriate services and supports. **What strategies is your district implementing toward an aligned, coordinated, and responsive referral process?**
- San Diego Unified School District is co-creating wellness centers with students to ensure the centers are inclusive, safe spaces, and truly for students by students. **How might your school or district work toward co-creating wellness initiatives with students?**