

STORIES FROM THE FIELD



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West Kern Consortium | Kern County, 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 toward scalable and systemic change.

Learn more about this work and listen to all the audiocasts in this series at cybhi.chhs.ca.gov/kern-county/

RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS LAUNCH SOCIAL WORKER PROGRAM TO SUPPORT STUDENT WELL-BEING AND LEARNING

Social workers occupy a critical role in many school communities. They provide services that help cultivate a positive school climate and support students' mental and behavioral health, well-being, and academic success.¹

Schools located in rural areas often face barriers to accessing mental health services and supports for their students due to limited workforce, distant proximity from community resources, and other factors. Despite these barriers, a rural community in Kern County, California, has generated an innovative approach to building and sustaining a dedicated cohort of school social workers.

Forming the West Kern Consortium

In 2018, three small school districts in California's Central Valley—Lost Hills Union Elementary School District (Lost Hills UESD), Semitropic Elementary School District, and Maple Elementary School District—came together to form the West Kern Consortium. Improving student mental

¹ School Social Work Association of America. (n.d.). *Role of school social worker*. <https://www.sswaa.org/school-social-work>

health supports was squarely on their list of priorities. Early on, the three districts submitted a joint application for a Full-Service Community Schools grant from the U.S. Department of Education. All three were awarded funding. Since then, three additional school districts in the area have joined the Consortium: Elk Hills Elementary School District, Taft Union High School District, and Wasco Union High School District.

The West Kern Consortium also convened a new group, the Children's Cabinet of West Kern, to advise the Consortium in its work. The Children's Cabinet is composed of political representatives, the Department of Public Health, the Department of Behavioral Health and Recovery Services, the local Medi-Cal provider, and parent/caregiver representatives from the school communities. One of the Cabinet's first efforts was to develop a shared vision for the students they serve, and they seized upon the importance of improving chronic absenteeism rates. Inspired by this shared goal, the six districts directed their attention to the "why" behind absenteeism rates, which prompted a deeper exploration into the health and well-being of the young people they serve.

Accordingly, the Consortium quickly concluded that they needed to increase their investment in mental and behavioral health supports for students. And that meant investing in their social workers.

Social Workers as Key Levers of Change

Beginning in 2021, the Lost Hills UESD, in partnership with the other school districts in the Consortium, launched an effort to reduce social worker turnover and increase the impact of social workers in local schools. The group has worked together to build an in-house social worker program that places and supports social workers in schools across the six member districts. The Lost Hills UESD manages the administrative components of the program, including human resource management and in-service training and support. All member school districts weigh in on the hiring of social workers for their respective districts to make sure candidates are aligned with the needs and interests of their districts' communities.

Each social worker is hired as a full-time staff member at the school they serve, which has proved to be important for attracting and retaining skilled staff. A lead social worker based at Lost Hills UESD provides supervision and support for the program, and the social workers also participate in ongoing professional development as part of their roles. Social workers in the program address the full range of mental and behavioral health supports for students who attend schools within the six districts, including connecting families with resources and working with students to support their well-being and remove barriers to their learning.

Prior to the current initiative, three schools in the Consortium shared a social worker who was employed by the San Bernardino County Office of Education. When the Consortium began its own social work program, the participating districts initially considered continuing to share each social worker across multiple schools to reduce costs. However, schools in the Consortium discovered that splitting time for each social worker across multiple sites was making it difficult for social workers to be a true part of the fabric of each school and to form meaningful relationships with students and their families. With this in mind, the Consortium made a strategic decision to hire full-time social worker positions on school campuses.

The Impact

The switch to full-time school social worker positions is helping to build familiarity and trusting relationships between social workers, students, and families. Additionally, school districts within the Consortium report positive gains in learning outcomes, including gains in English language arts and math and reductions in out-of-school suspensions. The districts attribute these gains to the increased presence and engagement of social workers in their schools.


TABLE 1. WEST KERN CONSORTIUM INFORMATION

Number of students served by the WKC school districts	3,790
Geographic setting	Rural
Grades served	P-12
School model	Traditional public schools

TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHICS OF STUDENTS SERVED BY THE WEST KERN CONSORTIUM

Student demographic	Percentage served
Latinx	77.52%
White	20.00%
Black	1.06%
Asian	0.37%
Native American or Alaska Native	0.24%
Multiracial	0.24%
Filipino	0.18%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.08%
Students with disabilities	10.45%
English language learners	20.66%
Foster youth	0.29%
Unhoused youth	0.24%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	81.08%

Data sourced from the California School Dashboard.

Questions to consider while you listen . . .

- The West Kern Consortium has operationalized the sharing of resources and leadership across six school districts to maximize students' access to mental health care. **What kinds of student services or supports could your school or district expand or enhance through collaboration with other partner agencies?**
- Trust is an important component of the West Kern Consortium social worker program, including the trust fostered between social workers and families and the trust between leaders at the various districts within the Consortium. **How might your school or district strengthen trust with families and partner agencies to advance your efforts to support children and youth mental and behavioral health and well-being?**