

ARE THE KIDS OK?

HOW CALIFORNIA CHARTER
PUBLIC SCHOOLS SUPPORT
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELLBEING
SCHOOLWIDE



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executive summary

The California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) recognizes that psychological and social wellbeing can be a precursor to academic engagement and growth. We also note that even since our last [Portrait of the Movement](#) report, *The Transition to Distance Learning Amid COVID-19 (2020)*, students have continued to experience uncertainty and trauma as COVID-19 remains a challenge for schools and communities – especially those who have been historically underserved.

Therefore, in this 2021-22 Portrait of the Movement report, we explore ways in which charter public schools are supporting students' social-emotional needs. Specifically, we look at the strategies and programs charter public schools are using to support their students. As part of our research gathering process, we interviewed the leaders of four exemplary charter public schools that represent different regions of the state, school models, and student populations. The schools are: Edison-Bethune Charter Academy (EBCA), Libertas College Preparatory Academy, SOAR Charter Academy, and Vibrant Minds Charter.

In 2020-21

1,294

California charter schools served

690,455

California charter school students

2020-21

Student Demographics

57%

Low-income

52%

Latinx

27%

White

14%

English learners

10%

Students with disabilities

7%

Black

In our conversations with these leaders, the following best practices emerged:



Trusting Relationships

Interviewed leaders emphasized that, as Rodolfo Garcia from EBCA says, “It’s all about relationships.” Leaders set up structures, like mentorship programs, to support the formation and development of trusting relationships with students.



Tailored Support

Leaders emphasized that a tailored approach is much more impactful than assuming ‘one-size-fits-all.’ Leaders use student surveys, observation, and other data to identify ways to reach every student.



Family and Community Partnerships

Social-emotional development cannot happen in a vacuum – it is far more effective when students receive consistent support at home, school, and in their communities. Charter leaders understand this well and are diligent about keeping families up-to-date on what is happening at school, involving them in school-level decision-making, and promoting community involvement.



Growth and Positivity

Charter educators are promoting self-efficacy by concentrating on academic growth and social-emotional development. As Trisha Lancaster from SOAR Charter says, “It’s not about what the last year and a half did to you...it’s about where you are now.”

introduction

To say this pandemic has negatively impacted students across the Golden State is an understatement. Many have lost loved ones due to COVID. Their parents or caregivers may have lost their jobs or seen their hours reduced, forcing them to suffer financial hardships or homelessness. Nationally, we have seen a [spike in mental health-related hospital visits](#) for five- to 17-year-olds. And, in California, [suicide rates](#) for 10-18 year-olds increased by 20% between 2019 and 2020.

In last year's [Portrait of the Movement](#) report, *The Transition to Distance Learning Amid COVID-19* (2021), we described how charter schools harnessed their innate flexibility and innovative problem-solving abilities to promote equitable and high-quality education for all students during distance learning. This year, we turn our focus to how California's charter public schools are ensuring their campuses are positive, nurturing environments where every student can learn, grow, and heal from the pandemic.

[CA Department of Public Health \(CDPH\) data](#) show that 93% of charter public schools used some of their COVID relief funds to make “[significant new investments](#)” in their social-emotional and mental health supports. We set out to learn more about some of the specific programs and strategies charter public schools are using to support students' social-emotional wellbeing during the transition to in-person learning during the 2021 fall semester. To understand these nuances, we interviewed the leaders of four outstanding charter public schools about how they are providing proactive, differentiated, and ongoing social-emotional support to students.

The strategies detailed in this report require passion, commitment, and collaboration between students, educators, and families. In this moment of unprecedented focus on, and investment in, social-emotional wellbeing, it is imperative that we learn from educators on the front lines, like those featured in this report, and leverage their experiences to provide more support for students.

The findings are based on interviews with:

Edison-Bethune Charter Academy (EBCA)

West Fresno | 500 students | Grades K-6

EBCA has been open for 41 years (23 as a charter school) and was in the top 10% of California public schools on math growth from 2017 to 2019.

Libertas College Preparatory Charter

South Los Angeles | 280 students | Grades 4-8

Libertas had a Similar Students Rank (SSR)¹ of 10 out of 10 for the past three years of state testing (2017-2019).

SOAR Charter Academy

San Bernardino | 430 students | Grades K-8

SOAR opened 13 years ago, and based on 96 parent/guardian reviews, received an average rating of 4.9 out of 5 on GreatSchools.

Vibrant Minds Charter School

Anaheim | 250 students | Grades K-6

Vibrant Minds is an intentionally small school that had all of their subgroups exceed the state average in ELA and Math for the past two years of state testing (2018 and 2019).

¹ See Appendix for more information on Similar Students Rank (SSR), a measure calculated by the California Charter Schools Association.



key challenges

Health Effects

At CCSA, we have heard many stories from educators and parents about the myriad of challenges students have faced during distance learning due to COVID-19. Research confirms that **long periods away from school decrease students' social-emotional wellbeing**. If left untreated, the stress and depression that many students are experiencing could lead to **long-lasting mental and physical health problems** like high blood pressure and a deteriorated immune system. Indeed, charter school leaders reported in interviews with CCSA that they have noticed changes in their students this fall. For example, Dr. Schroeder from Vibrant Minds Charter observed that more students are acting out during the 2021-2022 school year, which she believed may be partially due to reduced structure/supervision while the school was closed to in-person instruction. She also noted indications that students may have had increased, unfiltered internet access during school closures, such as inappropriate language and behaviors. Socially, she has noticed that the students crave in-person connection. When given access to play activities, they often opt to sit in a circle and talk with each other.

Inequitable Impacts

The ways and extent to which the pandemic has impacted students varies by students' age, [race/ethnicity](#), [disability status](#), etc. Dr. Schroeder from Vibrant Minds Charter noticed that her older students were less able to follow rules, while younger students were behind in their interpersonal social skills, which range from communication and listening to mindset and behavior. This aligns with research showing that gaps in schooling tend to have a larger impact on the social-emotional development of [students in elementary and middle school](#).

Behavioral Impacts

Many students had [less contact with their teachers](#) during remote learning amid the pandemic, which is concerning given the research showing that when students feel disconnected to their school, they are more likely to be [anxious or depressed, smoke, drink, bully others, and get into fights](#). Students' ties to their schools tend to be higher when they [perceive their teachers and administrators as calm, caring, clear, fair, and as holding high-expectations](#). That being said, there is a lot that educators can do to mitigate negative effects of the pandemic on students' social-emotional wellbeing. Students that feel connected to school tend to have increased [academic performance, attendance, motivation, and engagement](#). In the next section, we will dig deeper into how California's charter schools are ensuring that their students have a strong connection to their school and are thereby set up for success socially, emotionally, and academically.



How Charter Public Schools are Supporting Students



As mentioned, we know from [CDPH data](#) released in September 2021 that charter public schools across the state are using COVID relief funds to prioritize their students' social-emotional needs. In fact, **93% of charter public schools have made “significant new investments”** in the 2021-22 school year to improve students' mental health and social-emotional wellbeing.² Of these schools, about three quarters (74%) have “completely transformed” their mental health supports or undergone a “major” or “substantial” expansion of their services. Charter public schools that offered details on how they are spending COVID relief funds indicated they are using the money to hire additional social workers and/or social-emotional counselors, provide professional development for staff on social-emotional learning, create family engagement/wellness centers, and increase students' and families' access to mental health counseling services.

Build and Foster Trusting Relationships with Each Student

Just as students often need differentiated instruction to meet their unique needs, they also require differentiated social-emotional supports. Interviewees stressed the importance of building meaningful relationships with individual students. That way, students have an adult they can talk to on campus and the school can provide them with proactive support. Moreover, once established, these relationships must be nurtured. As Rodolfo Garcia from EBCA puts it, “It’s all about building relationships, and the relationships have to be worked at. Even the ones that you’ve figured out...You need to be willing to take on [large and small battles] because bottom line: we can’t change what’s going on in their home life, the only part we can control is what happens here at school.”

² See Appendix for more information on how this was calculated.

Meaningful Connections

Charter leaders said that school faculty and staff can start by just getting to know their students. For Garcia, connecting with students can be as simple as asking them to play a quick board game like Connect Four. He noticed that over the course of the game, students slowly started to open up about how they were feeling and what was going on outside of school. To encourage these types of conversations schoolwide, Trisha Lancaster, Executive Director of SOAR Charter Academy, uses a tool called “Power of One.” She prints out lists of all her students’ names and posts them to a wall in the staff room. Staff are instructed to put a dot next to the names of each student who they feel like they have a connection with. This provides a visual picture of which students do not have any dots so that staff can be intentional about getting to know them. The hope is that by the end of the year, every student will have a dot next to their name, meaning that they have a trusting relationship with at least one adult on campus.

Caring Mentors

Another way to formalize this process is through a mentoring program. According to Lancaster, this provides students with “a safe person on campus that they know is going out of their way to care for them in a different way than their teachers.” To increase capacity for this important and time-consuming work, all the schools we interviewed used their flexibility in spending to add counselors, social workers, and/or paraprofessionals to provide even more one-on-one support for students during the 2021-22 school year.

Tailor Supports to the Individual Student

Once school staff have formed connections with individual students, they can identify how to better support their social-emotional needs. For example, many educators are balancing both holding high expectations for students and empathizing with the fact that they are going through a lot this fall. Garcia from EBCA gave the example of empathizing with a student who did not submit homework on a particular day because he knew that this student moves from house-to-house and left the assignment at one parent’s house. Dr. Louie

Rodriguez, the Dean of UC Riverside's Graduate School of Education, calls this type of empathy that EBCA teachers exhibit "**cariño**." Cariño refers to a sincere concern for students' wellbeing that balances love and understanding with high expectations.

Student Surveys

One way to gather information needed to tailor supports efficiently is through student surveys. Many interviewed schools use surveys to monitor students' social-emotional health and learn how they like to be supported. Through surveys, they are able to gather information, identify any fluctuations/trends, and offer tailored supports or resources based on students' feedback and requests. For accessibility and validity, it is important that surveys are written using developmentally appropriate language and offered in students' native languages if needed. For example, SOAR uses emojis in their surveys for younger students so they can communicate their thoughts, attitudes, and feelings.

Safety Nets

Interviewees found that you cannot always rely solely on students being open with adults at school about their social-emotional wellbeing. Observing and speaking with students in the halls and at recess, for example, can help staff refer students for counseling services. SOAR's new counselor is now helping several students who did not seek out her support yet are now benefitting from her services because of her careful observations and informal conversations with them. Educators can also respond appropriately and proactively by understanding that students exhibiting behavioral issues may need supports or interventions. During the transition to in-person schooling at SOAR this fall, educators observed students acting out. Instead of simply issuing consequences, staff viewed these behavioral issues as indicators and provided students with additional support like counseling.

Proactive, Tailored Programs

Finally, tailoring supports does not always have to be reactive – interviewed charter schools were proactive about promoting positive social-emotional interactions and providing services to students with known risk factors. At Libertas, staff noticed that students who were most at-risk for mental health concerns tended to be students with disabilities. With this knowledge, staff

became more intentional about ensuring these students' needs were being met by organizing special events, field trips, and community service opportunities tailored to their students' identities and interests. For example, Libertas promotes positive social interactions while celebrating students' backgrounds and identities through schoolwide cultural events for occasions like National Hispanic Heritage Month.

Partner with Families, Caregivers and Communities

According to the four charter schools we interviewed, family engagement is an important part of social-emotional support.

“There needs to be a partnership between what’s happening at home and what’s happening in the classroom because you don’t grow if it’s in isolation.”

- Anna Carlstone-Hurst, Head of School at Libertas College Prep



Constant and Consistent Communication

The school leaders we spoke with say family engagement was common practice prior to and during the pandemic. Many of them mentioned [ParentSquare](#), a secure platform for school-home communications, as a useful way to communicate with families. Teachers and administrators at Vibrant Minds are also frequently calling families to provide updates, voice concerns, or address any questions/feedback that a parent wants to discuss. At EBCA, staff noticed that families were not receiving or responding to traditional communications like calls and letters. They found that social media was a much more effective and engaging way to update families on what is happening at school. They post videos, events, and updates to Facebook in both English and Spanish. They even created an app to communicate with families that is accessible in any language.

Involve Families in School-Level Decisions

Beyond updates, the schools we spoke with also invite families to meaningfully contribute to their school communities. Through parent councils, grade-level liaisons, and more informal dialogues with staff, families can provide new ideas and feedback on the school's social-emotional supports. For example, to offer more equitable and relevant supports, SOAR's staff convene an English language learner parent forum to provide details on how their program supports English language development and to solicit feedback.

Family Participation in Social-Emotional Learning

Dr. Schroeder, Founding Executive Director of Vibrant Minds Charter, noticed that many students returned to in-person school this fall with behavioral challenges. To promote more positive behaviors, teachers and staff engage in frequent and meaningful two-way communication with families. At Vibrant Minds, the small size of the school helps teachers and staff really get to know students' caregivers. Teachers often call parents to tell them stories about work their child is doing in class, and when applicable, ask for their ideas and support in dealing with any concerning behaviors.

Promote Community Involvement

Research shows that community service can increase students' sense of **personal and social responsibility, self-esteem, and self-efficacy**. These experiences can also lead to **improved social skills**, an ability to **relate to/embrace diverse groups**, and a decreased interest in risky activities like **violence, substance abuse, and unprotected sex**. It is therefore unsurprising that many interviewees discussed how providing opportunities for students to engage with surrounding communities through service projects, field trips, capstone projects, and other events supports their social-emotional development.

Stay Positive – Focus on Growth & Celebrate Progress

There has been a lot of media attention on learning loss and the ways the pandemic impacted students – especially those who have been **historically underserved**. However, if students continue to be immersed in this narrative, they could internalize the message that they are behind. In contrast, our interviewees focused on academic and social-emotional growth rather than what was lost during the pandemic.

Focus on Growth

Trisha Lancaster from SOAR Charter said that she had seen a lot of student progress during the first six weeks of school. She explained why she credits much of that success to the schoolwide emphasis on growth, “That conversation schoolwide about growth – any kind of growth...is empowering to our kids’ mental health because it’s not about what the last year and a half did to you or what impact it had on your academics or emotional or social wellbeing. It’s about where you are right now. Where can we start to build from?”

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Celebrate Wins

Another way charter leaders stay positive is by celebrating positive behavior. Libertas has a “Strength of Character” system where students can earn points for modeling the school’s core values. For example, if a student is struggling to grasp a concept but persists, then a teacher might recognize that student in positive way by calling out, “[Student] spent the entire class trying even when it was hard - plus five for self-determination.” This celebrates the students’ efforts and promotes positive behaviors while making the core values observable and something that students want to model for their teachers and peers.

Remember, This is Not a Normal Year

Dr. Schroeder from Vibrant Minds said that one way she stays positive is by remembering that this year is “anything but normal” despite the return to in-person instruction. For nearly two years, educators have been working tirelessly for their scholars and are understandably tired. However, as Schroeder advised, “take heart and know that this is truly temporary. Reach out and talk to colleagues.” She added that one benefit of this not being a “normal” year is that charter schools have access to additional funding and now is the time to use that money to provide students and staff with even more services and supports.



conclusion & recommendations

The return to in-person instruction is ongoing and many schools are in the process of gathering data on the effectiveness of their social-emotional supports. Nevertheless, in our interviews for this report, as well as CCSA's conversations with charter school leaders across the state, it is evident that the charter school movement is deeply committed to the wellbeing of students – especially those hit hardest by this pandemic. Many charter public schools are creatively using their flexibility to double-down on providing social-emotional supports that promote personal and academic growth. While specific strategies varied, the charter public schools featured in this report focused on five key themes: trusting relationships, tailored supports, family and community engagement, and a focus on growth. However, supporting students in these ways takes time, resources, and can be emotionally taxing. To mitigate these challenges and help set students up for success, CCSA has the following recommendations for educators, policymakers, and advocates based on the findings from our research:

Practice

Support Teachers' and Staff's Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Last school year, a larger share of educators – **especially Black and Latinx teachers** – reported they were **likely to leave their jobs** by the end of the school year than before the pandemic. As a result of countless challenges inherent to teaching during a pandemic, in conjunction with personal concerns like health and childcare, educators are more **anxious and burnt out** than ever. It is therefore vital that schools and districts prioritize their staff's social-emotional wellbeing as well. This can include providing staff with access to counseling, hiring additional staff, monitoring their mental health through staff surveys, and lessening the burden on school staff by connecting families with supports/programs/funding outside of school.

Provide Professional Development on Social-Emotional Learning and Relationship Building for Teachers & Staff

School leaders can also implement high-quality professional development on social-emotional learning and support given that staff may feel unprepared to support their students in this way. In fact, most teachers received **no social-emotional training** in their teacher preparation programs and would therefore benefit from additional guidance. This could also include support in relationship building, **especially across different identities**.

Remember that Schoolwide Consistency and Continuity is Key

In learning about the charter schools featured in this report, we noticed a common theme: Relationship-building and social-emotional learning were a schoolwide priority. Schools can deliver consistent, ongoing support by creating a set of common practices, language, and tools schoolwide for all adults on campus — **administrators, teachers, and staff** all have a role to play. This also includes communicating with families in a consistent way and at regular intervals. Given all of the change and trauma of the past two years, it is especially

key that educators clearly communicate to students and their families the kind of social-emotional supports that exist on their campuses and how to access those supports.

Ensure That All Social-Emotional Supports are Culturally Responsive and Equitable

It is essential that educators consider how students' behaviors and emotions are shaped by factors like cultural background, race/ethnicity, and disability status. As the authors of [this literature review](#) posited, “A culturally responsive approach, one that situates and celebrates learning within the rich cultural contexts of students, may be the key to ensuring that students can reap the full benefits of social-emotional learning.”

Policy

Prioritize Social and Emotional Support for Students and Educators

To help students and educators recover from the pandemic, the government has provided California public schools and districts with over [30 billion dollars](#) from spring 2020 to fall 2021. Many of these funding sources, like the [federal CARES Act](#), specifically target “mental health support” and “social-emotional learning.” While this additional financial support has been instrumental to schools' ability to nurture students' social and emotional wellbeing, the impacts of the pandemic and distance learning will be long-lasting. Rates of [anxiety and depression](#) among children were increasing even before the pandemic, and historically underserved groups like [students of color, LGBTQ youth, teens, and young children](#) may experience more severe and long-lasting mental health effects than their peers. On the bright side, kids are “[foundationally resilient](#),” and if policymakers focus on sustaining equitable funding and resources for schools and districts – especially those serving historically underserved students – for the long-term, then we can bounce back from the pandemic with a stronger, more equitable public education system for all students.

appendix

Similar Students Ranks (SSR)

CCSA created the Similar Students Ranks (SSR), as a key component of our [Accountability Framework](#). The SSR orders schools according to how their students performed on standardized tests compared to schools serving similar students statewide. It does this by comparing a school's performance compared to a prediction that is calculated based on how schools serving similar grades with similar demographic characteristics performed. For more information on the methodology, see CCSA's [technical guide](#).

It is important to note that due to COVID-19 and the suspension of state testing in 2019-20, CCSA was not able to calculate a State Rank or Similar Students Rank for 2019-20.

California Department of Health: Safe Schools Data Analysis Methodology

For these calculations, CCSA analysts used Python code to gather charter schools' responses to the [CPDH](#) "Safe Schools Survey" in September 2021. There were 1,006 total charter schools that responded to the survey question asking whether they expanded mental health services. There were 337 that responded to the question about the scale of the expansions. Only 14 schools provided details on how they were expanding services. CCSA analysts conducted this analysis first with all schools and found that of the 1,006 responses, 93% of charters planned to expand mental health services. They then repeated this calculation with autonomous charter schools only and found that 93% out of 814 autonomous charter schools expanded services. The CDPH defines "expanding mental health services" as follows: "The district [or charter school] has made significant new investments in the 2021-22 school year to expand the offerings that support the mental health and social and emotional well-being of students, such as counseling and responses to trauma."

Selection Criteria: Interviewed Charter Schools

CCSA staff selected schools for interviews based on a variety of factors. For this year's Portrait of the Movement, CCSA analysts wanted to feature schools from regions that were not covered in last year's study. As such, they limited their search to schools in Fresno, San Bernardino, and Orange counties. CCSA's Advocacy Team staff then worked directly with schools in those areas and pinpointed exemplary charter schools based on the depth and breadth of the social-emotional support they provide for students. The one exception was Libertas, as CCSA analysts interviewed Libertas' Head of School, Anna Carlstone-Hurst, for CCSA's report "[Two Charter Public Schools, One Mission: Latino Academic Excellence](#) (2021)."



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