Youth Reimagining School Behavioral Health Systems

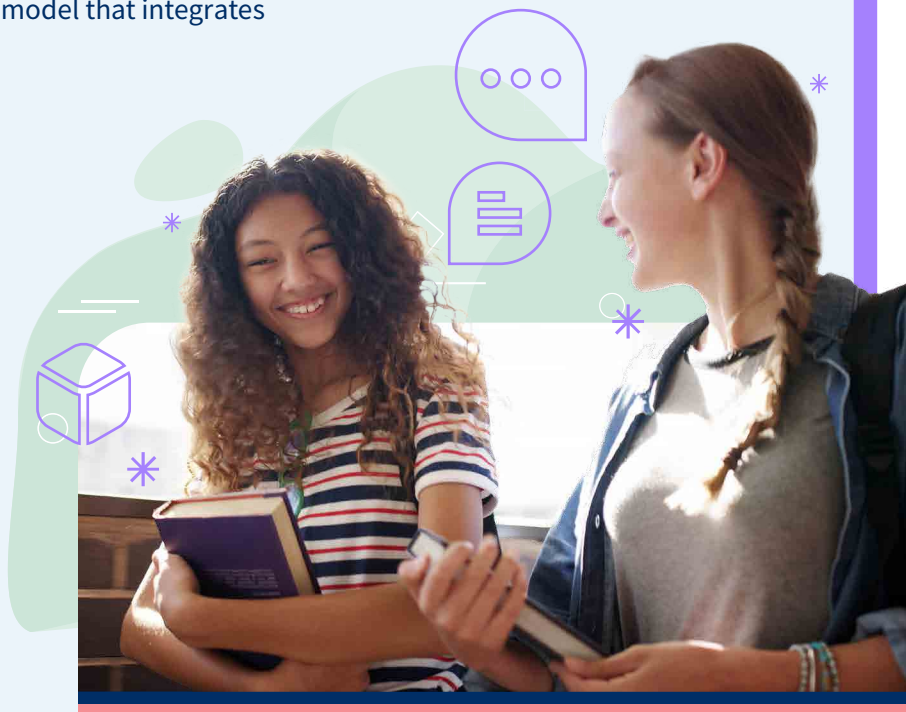
California's Behavioral Health Student Services Act (BHSSA) aims to transform schools into centers of wellness. A statewide evaluation is underway, which includes case studies of four high schools that are using a **Youth Engagement Cohort (YEC)** model that integrates youth voices into the evaluation process.

What is the Youth Engagement Cohort?

The YEC is a five-session structured, student-centered process facilitated by WestEd evaluators in which students:

- **Examine school-level data**
- **Reflect on supports available**
- **Share personal perspectives**
- **Develop and present recommendations**

Through this process, schools and districts gather students' perspectives and recommendations on their school behavioral health system. Students gain leadership, evaluation, and communication skills.



Youth voices are powerful drivers of change. The YEC ensures that students' personal perspectives shape how schools design and strengthen their continuum of behavioral health supports.

Who participates?

- **Youth Ambassadors (YAs):** About 10 students with diverse experiences and identities
- **Trusted adult:** A supportive school staff member who attends all sessions
- **Evaluation staff:** Facilitators who guide and structure the process
- **Adult partners:** School, district, and community members who join the final Youth Voice Panel

How are YEC sites selected?

School sites are nominated for participation by BHSSA partners at the county and school district levels. The WestEd evaluation team works closely with a coordinator and a youth liaison at each site to recruit students and trusted adults to participate in the YEC.

Becoming a Youth Ambassador

Students best suited for the YEC are:

- Interested in behavioral health and wellbeing
- Open to exploring local data with peers
- Comfortable sharing their perspectives
- Willing to present recommendations
- Able to attend all five sessions

Partnering With Adults

The final YEC session is a Youth Voice Panel that invites up to 20 adults to listen and respond to youth recommendations. This session invites adults who are:

- Interested in youth perspectives on supports for behavioral health and wellbeing
- Open to collaborating with students
- Representative of schools, families, community-based organizations, districts, county offices of education, and county behavioral health departments

The BHSSA Evaluation

California's BHSSA provides funding and support for partnerships between county behavioral health departments and local education agencies. Fifty-seven grantee partnerships across the state are implementing BHSSA-funded activities and services within a continuum of behavioral health initiatives that emphasize prevention and early intervention. To measure the implementation and impact of the BHSSA, WestEd is conducting a statewide evaluation that includes:

Community Engagement
Ongoing engagement with a broad group of partners to foster youth empowerment and ongoing partner collaboration for collective data insights and learning

Contextual Descriptive Analysis
Information about current behavioral health services and needs across the state

Process and Systems Change Analysis
Results from a survey focused on BHSSA partnerships and school behavioral health systems paired with grant monitoring data shared by California's Commission for Behavioral Health

Grant Partnership Case Studies
Stories from county behavioral health departments and local education agencies about how BHSSA funds were used to build partnerships and strengthen school behavioral health systems

School Case Studies (Includes the YEC)
Stories from behavioral health professionals, educators, families, and youth about the implementation and impact of BHSSA-funded activities and services on school behavioral health systems and student wellbeing

The California BHSSA Evaluation's Youth Engagement Model

Building more equitable, youth-informed school behavioral health systems through participatory evaluation

Evaluation Planning
Evaluators engage with youth and other community members in the evaluation planning process.

Session 1: Data Equity Walk
Youth Ambassadors systematically examine relevant local data to identify patterns, disparities, and areas of inquiry while also reflecting critically on the extent to which the data represents student experiences.
(3-hour on-site)

Session 2: Asset Mapping
Youth Ambassadors identify and visually document the behavioral health and wellbeing resources available within their school and community and assess the accessibility and distribution of existing supports.
(1.5-hour on-site)

Session 3: Data Review and Sense-Making
Youth Ambassadors review qualitative data collected from focus groups at their school. Using data visualization tools, they analyze findings, reflect on emerging themes, and draw connections to the quantitative data examined in prior sessions.
(1.5-hour virtual)

Session 4: Prepare Recommendations
Youth Ambassadors identify priority themes through guided reflection and collaborative discussion. They draft preliminary responses to anticipated questions and begin to articulate the messages they wish to convey to adults in the Youth Voice Panel.
(1.5-hour virtual)

Session 5: Youth Voice Panel
Youth Ambassadors present their insights directly to adults and engage in collaborative reflection on their findings.
(3-hour on-site)

Evaluation Integration
Evaluators use insights from the Youth Voice Panel to meaningfully shape conclusions and recommendations, ensuring youth perspectives are central to the BHSSA Evaluation Report.

Youth Engagement Resources

The following are examples of resources that were consulted and adapted to design the YEC sessions:

- **Urban Institute Data Walks**: An interactive way to engage community members as research partners by using data as a platform for collaboration
- **Participatory Asset Mapping**: A toolkit for creating tangible displays of community assets and resources to better understand sources of strength and opportunities
- **Participatory Systems Change for Equity: An Inquiry Guide for Child-, Youth-, and Family-Serving Agencies**: A planning guide that systems leaders can use to integrate components of participatory planning into their work with partners and community members
- **Speak Out, Listen Up! Tools for Using Student Perspectives and Local Data for School Improvement**: Tools and activities to help educators understand student experiences, address school-related topics and problems, and rethink policies and practices
- **We Know Us Guide to Participatory Meaning Making with Young People**: A resource that is for, by, and about youth to help adult researchers and practitioners become allies who fully understand the value of youth voice in research
- **Dabbling in the Data: A Hands-on Guide to Participatory Data Analysis**: A guide for practical approaches to exploring and analyzing data frequently used in youth-serving organizations that draw on the experiences, knowledge, and insights of youth participants
- **Street Data**: A model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation designed to center students' cultural assets and voices
- **Participatory Analysis**: A method that involves bringing a group of interest holders, such as program participants or program staff, into the data interpretation and meaning-making process

The statewide Behavioral Health Student Services Act (BHSSA) Evaluation, led by WestEd in collaboration with California's Commission for Behavioral Health, aims to capture insights and experiences that will inform future funding, expand partnerships, strengthen systems, and ensure community needs are heard.

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CBH Commission for Behavioral Health

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