

OVERVIEW OF THE MENTAL HEALTH STUDENT SERVICES ACT EVALUATION

This document provides an overview of the evaluation of the Mental Health Student Services Act (MHSSA). In June 2023, the Commission partnered with WestEd to plan and conduct the evaluation, which is being completed in two phases:

Phase 1: Evaluation Planning. The Commission and its evaluation partner WestEd collaborated on a robust evaluation planning process, grounded in community engagement, that resulted in a feasible and meaningful plan to evaluate the MHSSA (presented below).

Phase 2: Evaluation Plan Implementation and Dissemination. The Commission and WestEd will implement the plan to evaluate the MHSSA and disseminate findings and lessons learned on a regular basis as they become available.

PHASE 1: EVALUATION PLANNING

The MHSSA Evaluation planning process took place between June 2023 and October 2024. During this time, the Commission and WestEd have made significant investments in community engagement activities to foster trust, solicit feedback, collaborate, and codesign the evaluation with partners. Activities were designed to solicit feedback on deliverables including a community engagement plan, theory of change and logic model, evaluation questions and metrics, and a draft evaluation plan.

The following briefly summarizes the activities and events that occurred during the evaluation planning process. The Commission and WestEd:

- Held six MHSSA Evaluation Workgroup meetings to engage subject matter experts and the public.
- Held over 30 Listening Sessions with diverse community partners including students, parents, educators, mental health providers, and others.
- Established a Youth Advisory Group comprised of 16 youth from diverse backgrounds to guide evaluation planning.
- Presented at MHSSA Collaboration meetings.

A principal insight from those activities is that partners value having a voice in the evaluation process and are committed to ongoing collaboration.

In addition, several methodological constraints and priorities emerged from community engagement with partners during the MHSSA Evaluation planning phase. Each MHSSA grantee has taken a unique approach to funding services and supports that address student mental health needs and improve student wellbeing. This is because the MHSSA provides critically important flexibility for grantee partners to innovate. However, this flexibility



introduces methodological challenges in evaluating the statewide implementation of a heterogeneous set of MHSSA-funded activities and services.

An additional challenge for this evaluation’s design relates to the timeline of MHSSA implementation versus that of the evaluation. The MHSSA Evaluation planning process began after grants were awarded. MHSSA local implementation has been underway since the first phase of funding in 2020. This timeline presents constraints on the methods that can be used, particularly quantitative research methods that require a baseline comparison.

PHASE 2: EVALUATION PLAN IMPLEMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION

The MHSSA Evaluation Plan has been designed to measure how this early and substantial statewide investment has impacted interagency collaboration and transformational systems change to ultimately support schools in becoming centers of wellbeing and healing. The Evaluation has been codesigned by WestEd, the Mental Health Services Oversight & Accountability Commission (the Commission) and a broad group of community partners to ensure that the Evaluation reflects diverse community perspectives.

Community engagement activities will be embedded throughout implementation of the evaluation. WestEd’s engagement strategy will build upon previous community engagement efforts in Phase 1 to include youth empowerment, youth-facilitated data collection, and ongoing partner collaboration.

The evaluation will be implemented between November 2024 and June 2027, and the scope of work includes four key evaluation components.

1. Contextual Descriptive Analyses
2. Process and Systems Change Evaluation
3. Grantee Partnership Case Studies
4. Implementation and Impact School Case Studies

The following table provides a brief description of the four proposed methods for evaluating the MHSSA. The table also includes community engagement feedback from the planning phase (Phase 1) that informed each component of the evaluation.

Evaluation Components	Community Engagement Feedback
<p><u>1. Contextual Descriptive Analyses</u></p> <p>The current state of the mental health and wellbeing of students in California will be described by county and include exploration of school, district, and community characteristics that are related to students’ mental health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>Grant and community partners stated that it was critical to understand and measure variation in student mental health across different regions and populations.</p>

<p><u>2. Process and Systems Change Evaluation</u></p> <p>The evaluator will conduct a statewide evaluation to understand implementation of MHSSA and how it has brought about systems change. The evaluation includes collecting survey data from all grantees on their partnerships, implementation of MHSSA-funded activities and services, community strengths/needs, other school mental health initiatives, and outcomes. The evaluation will be designed to provide grantees with useful feedback that can support their local planning and programming efforts.</p>	<p>Grant and community partners shared that they would like to engage with meaningful and useful data through the MHSSA Evaluation. They wanted to use evaluation findings to share successes and challenges they have encountered. They emphasized the importance of collecting data that would be used not only to satisfy reporting requirements but also to support continuous improvement.</p>
<p><u>3. Grantee Partnership Case Studies</u></p> <p>The evaluator will conduct case studies with 10 county behavioral health and education grant partners to contextualize and describe how school communities across the state are reimagining systems change through local incentivized partnerships to build comprehensive and effective school mental health systems.</p>	<p>Grant and community partners emphasized that MHSSA is unique because it incentivizes interagency partnerships. They are proud of the work they do and want to demonstrate how LEAs and county behavioral health departments are “better together.”</p>
<p><u>4. Implementation and Impact School Case Studies</u></p> <p>The evaluator will conduct case studies of 12 MHSSA-funded schools that will explain the impact of MHSSA-funded activities and services, and school mental health system changes on school and student outcomes. It will also explore intervention conditions and describe MHSSA implementation in the context of each participating school.</p>	<p>Grant and community partners expressed an interest in understanding the school-level mental health system in which MHSSA-funded activities and services were implemented so that they could assess the extent to which different approaches may apply in their own school-level mental health systems.</p>

Next Steps

If approved by the Commission, the MHSSA Evaluation will be implemented beginning in February 2025. As the evaluation unfolds, the Commission and WestEd will publicly disseminate findings as they emerge. It is our goal to keep community partners informed and produce findings and lessons learned on a regular basis that can be incorporated into school mental health planning and practice.