



Getting Down to **FACTS**

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Student Well-Being in California's Current Context: Policy, Conditions, and Supports

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Introduction

Student well-being includes basic needs such as safety, social and emotional health, and meaningful opportunities to learn. It is shaped within an ecosystem of relationships and conditions that extend across families, schools, and communities. This brief draws on several Getting Down to Facts III technical reports that examine student well-being in California, including research on absenteeism, stress, marginalized student groups, and the community and developmental contexts that shape students' experiences. Across these studies, student well-being emerges not as a separate goal from academic learning, but as one of the conditions that makes learning possible.

Several reports provide evidence that California's recent investments, including major commitments to community schools and Transitional Kindergarten, have shown promise for improving students' well-being and learning (Fisher et al.; Hernández et al.). Other reports identify ways California's education systems could better support well-being, including stronger staff training, more targeted supports for marginalized students, and more concrete strategies for building relationships with families from diverse backgrounds. These reports offer insight into how California schools are currently supporting student well-being and where those efforts could be strengthened.

Key Findings

1 Well-being and academics are closely intertwined.

Academic and social-emotional outcomes often move together, and interventions that improve one can also improve the other. Recent evidence also suggests that students are increasingly missing school for reasons linked to well-being, including sadness and bullying, which can negatively impact academic growth (Hernández et al.; Gee and Yu).

2 Strong relationships are central to both well-being and academic achievement, especially for vulnerable student populations.

Research highlights the importance of relationship-based learning in adolescence and the foundational role of trusting relationships for Black and Latine families' school experiences (Immordino-Yang and Darling-Hammond; Garcia et al.; Winn et al.).

3 Concrete and relational investments may support both well-being and academic outcomes, but current supports remain uneven.

Strategies such as community schools, Transitional Kindergarten, and high-impact tutoring show promise for improving student learning and support structures (Fisher et al.; Hernández et al.; Loeb and Ziegler). At the same time, many educators and support staff report feeling underprepared to meet the needs of vulnerable students, and evidence suggests that professional development can support educators in implementing approaches that can advance improved outcomes when implemented consistently.

4

Better data are necessary to assess and support student well-being, especially for marginalized groups.

California has improved some data systems, but major gaps remain for groups such as LGBTQ+ students, immigrant-origin students, and the staff who support them. Those gaps make it harder to identify what is working and where additional support is needed (Sun et al.; Sattin-Bajaj; Kaler et al.; Lemons et al.).

5

Student well-being is shaped by broader social, economic, and political conditions beyond the school itself.

Rising costs, federal immigration enforcement, and broader political conflict affect the well-being of students, families, and educators, especially among already vulnerable groups. These broader pressures shape both how students experience school and how school systems function (Garcia et al.; Sun et al.; Sattin-Bajaj; Fisher et al.; Marsh et al.).

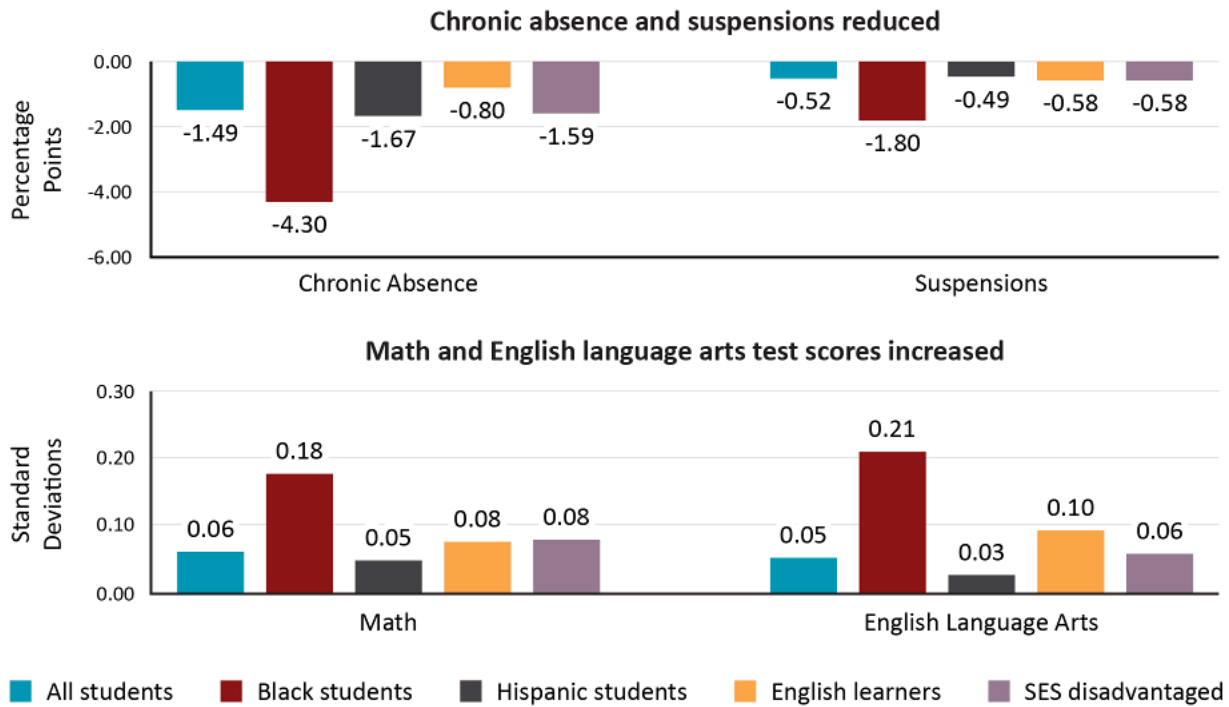
The Evidence Behind These Findings

Well-being and academics are closely intertwined

Multiple technical reports demonstrate that measures of academic success and well-being are interlinked. For example, Hernández et al. leverage outcomes data from the California Department of Education (CDE) to study early outcomes associated with community schools, particularly California's Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP). The authors find promising patterns for community schools in both student test scores and indicators of social-emotional and behavioral well-being, such as chronic absence and suspensions. Indeed, they find the largest gains for students from historically underserved groups. For example, chronic absence and suspension rates were lower by 4.30 and 1.80 percentage points, respectively, among Black students and 1.59 and 0.58 percentage points, respectively, among socioeconomically disadvantaged students. While reported outcomes for students at community schools were positive, these effect sizes are larger than those of all students in their sample, a pattern which holds for test scores in math and English language arts as well (see **Figure 1**).

That these positive effects are especially large for historically underserved students is notable in light of the state’s goals to close persistent opportunity gaps.

Figure 1. Consistent improvements across all outcomes for historically underserved students



Note. From Hernández et al.

In their study of chronic absenteeism in California, Gee and Yu find that student well-being relates to chronic absenteeism, which thus has implications for academic engagement and performance. Exploring longitudinal trends in data on student-reported reasons for absences, Gee and Yu find that while rates of chronic absenteeism are down across the state since the 2019-20 school year, some well-being related reasons for absences have increased over the past four years. For example, absences reported as related to bullying increased by 0.16 percentage points (1.16 percent), and absences reported as related to sadness increased by 0.53 percentage points (8.63 percent); both increases are statistically significant (see **Table 1**). While chronic absenteeism rates are declining, they are not declining fast enough to meet the state’s ambitious goals.

Table 1. Change in Reported Reasons for Absences (2019-20 vs. 2023-24)

	Prevalence in 2019-20 (percent)	Change from 2019-20 to 2023-24 (percentage points)		95% CI	<i>p</i> -value
Illness	34.2%	7.30	▲	5.98 8.63	0.00
Disengagement					
Behind in Schoolwork	5.4%	0.12	-	-0.17 0.42	0.42
Bored	4.0%	1.64	▲	1.41 1.87	0.00
Family Obligations and Friends					
Cared for Family or Friends	4.2%	0.52	▲	0.31 0.72	0.00
Spend Time with Friends	1.3%	0.31	▲	0.20 0.41	0.00
Safety and Well-being					
Bullied	1.0%	0.16	▲	0.08 0.25	0.00
Sad	8.1%	0.53	▲	0.17 0.89	0.00
Not Enough Sleep	9.8%	0.26	-	-0.15 0.67	0.22
Not Safe	1.4%	0.00	-	-0.21 0.22	0.98
Alcohol or Drugs	1.1%	-0.21	▼	-0.29 -0.12	0.00
Transportation	2.3%	0.76	▲	0.61 0.91	0.00
<i>N</i>	260,302				

Note. From Gee and Yu

Immordino-Yang and Darling-Hammond suggest that the link between well-being and learning may be particularly powerful in adolescence. They use theories and evidence from affective neuroscience, developmental science, the learning sciences, and educational design to explore how high schools may be reimagined to be more closely attuned to the needs of adolescents. They find that civic reasoning – an element of what the authors identify as *transcendent thinking* – is a particularly important aspect of learning that not only strengthens adolescents’ cognitive development, but also neurobiological development that supports well-being.

Strong relationships are central to both well-being and academic achievement, especially for vulnerable student populations

Several reports suggest that both learning and well-being are closely linked with the development of strong, healthy relationships. This applies to both individual-level relationships as well as classroom- and school-level relationships between school staff and families and communities. For example, Hernández et al. found that a strength of community schools was that staff were able to cultivate positive relationships with their students and families that fostered a sense of school connectedness and engagement.

Winn et al. and Garcia et al. similarly find that relationship-building is a foundational element of schooling for Black and Latine families. In their work with Black parents in Northern California, Winn et al. find that parents experience their children's educational trajectories as deeply relational. Garcia et al. find that among Latine families, relational dimensions of school life are an important part of how parents view their students' educational experiences.

Unfortunately, high levels of staff turnover make it challenging to develop strong and lasting relationships between communities, students, and schools. Leung-Gagné et al. find that one in seven teachers leave their position from the start of one school year to the next. Arshan et al. also find that principal turnover in California is higher than the national average. Further, reports by Lemons et al. and Kaler et al. suggest that turnover is a risk not only for teachers and leaders, but for school staff across roles (e.g., paraeducators, school psychologists). Thus, staffing instability in these key areas makes the establishment of strong, lasting relationships between students, families, communities, and school staff challenging.

Concrete and relational investments may support both well-being and academic outcomes, but current supports remain uneven

California has made notable investments in strategies that show promise for improving both academic achievement and well-being. For example, Fisher et al. find that while material hardship impacts a substantial number of families across the state, TK programming provides an element of relief to families in terms of child care, and the authors find that over 90 percent of their sample of parents surveyed expressed interest in enrolling their children in TK among all income groups. Additionally, the state has made significant investments in high-impact tutoring, numerous studies of which demonstrate positive effects on academic achievement among programs that meet certain design criteria (Loeb and Ziegler). Further still, early evidence from CCSPP suggests promising associations with student outcomes. The state's concrete investments, including financial, in these strategies have been essential to facilitating their success. Each program has also faced implementation challenges that additional support and capacity could help address.

One area in which additional resources could be especially useful is in training staff to support students academically and socio-emotionally, particularly historically marginalized students and those with additional support needs. For example, Sattin-Bajaj finds that although teacher candidates reported that they found it important to understand immigration issues, very few felt highly prepared to educate children growing up in immigrant families, with most (59 percent) feeling only moderately prepared and only 6 percent feeling highly prepared (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Teacher Candidates’ Reported Sense of Preparedness after Completion of their Teacher Preparation Program

Overall, how prepared do you feel to successfully educate children growing up in immigrant families?			
<i>Program</i>	<i>Not at all or a minimal amount (%)</i>	<i>Moderate or some amount (%)</i>	<i>A lot (%)</i>
TEP 1 (n=36)	52	48	0
TEP 2 (n=55)	47	49	4
TEP 3 (n=49)	10	85	6
<i>Total N=140</i>	<i>35% (n=49)</i>	<i>59% (n=86)</i>	<i>6% (n=10)</i>

Note. From Sattin-Bajaj.

Other studies suggest that teachers are not the only staff for whom additional support would be beneficial, particularly in meeting the unique needs of some learners such as students with disabilities. For example, Lemons et al. found that while paraeducators can be highly effective with adequate training, much of the workforce is faced with ineffective training opportunities that limit both their self-efficacy and their effectiveness. Further, Kaler et al. found that school administrators cited training and retention issues as salient among multiple staff groups, including teachers, paraeducators, and related service providers (e.g., speech-language pathologists, school psychologists).

Better data are necessary to assess and support student well-being, especially for marginalized groups

Several technical reports point to limited data availability as a major barrier to understanding key well-being outcomes, especially for certain student groups and subgroups. For example, Sun et al. find that the state collects and disseminates limited data on LGBTQ+ students. More comprehensive information, particularly on subgroups of LGBTQ+ students (e.g., based on gender and sexual identity), can help develop targeted supports and highlight successes. For example, using nuanced survey data from 7,522 high school students across the state, Sun et al. find that LGBTQ+ students report higher college-going aspirations on average than their heterosexual peers.

As another example, Garcia et al. find that state data do not fully account for the diversity within Latinidad. Participants in their study pushed back against a monolithic definition of Latine families and students, and additional data collection that captures more of this diversity could be beneficial for developing a better understanding of how these students and families navigate California schools. Furthermore, additional data collection could help facilitate the targeted implementation of additional concrete supports, such as more robust language translation services for families of diverse backgrounds.

Additional data on staff would also improve the current data infrastructure in the state. For example, there is currently limited data publicly available on staff working conditions, but collection of a working conditions survey might help establish protective and risk factors for staff turnover, which is high among teachers, paraeducators, and leaders (Arshan et al.; Leung-Gagné et al.; Kaler et al.; Lemons et al.). Policy interventions developed to target these risk and protective factors could serve to abate turnover, which could in turn facilitate more effective teaching and relationship-building in schools.

Importantly, it is essential to consider data privacy when seeking to collect additional data, as already vulnerable groups may be put at greater risk if data collection and sharing is not done with comprehensive consideration of potential harm.

Student well-being is shaped by broader social, economic, and political conditions beyond the school itself

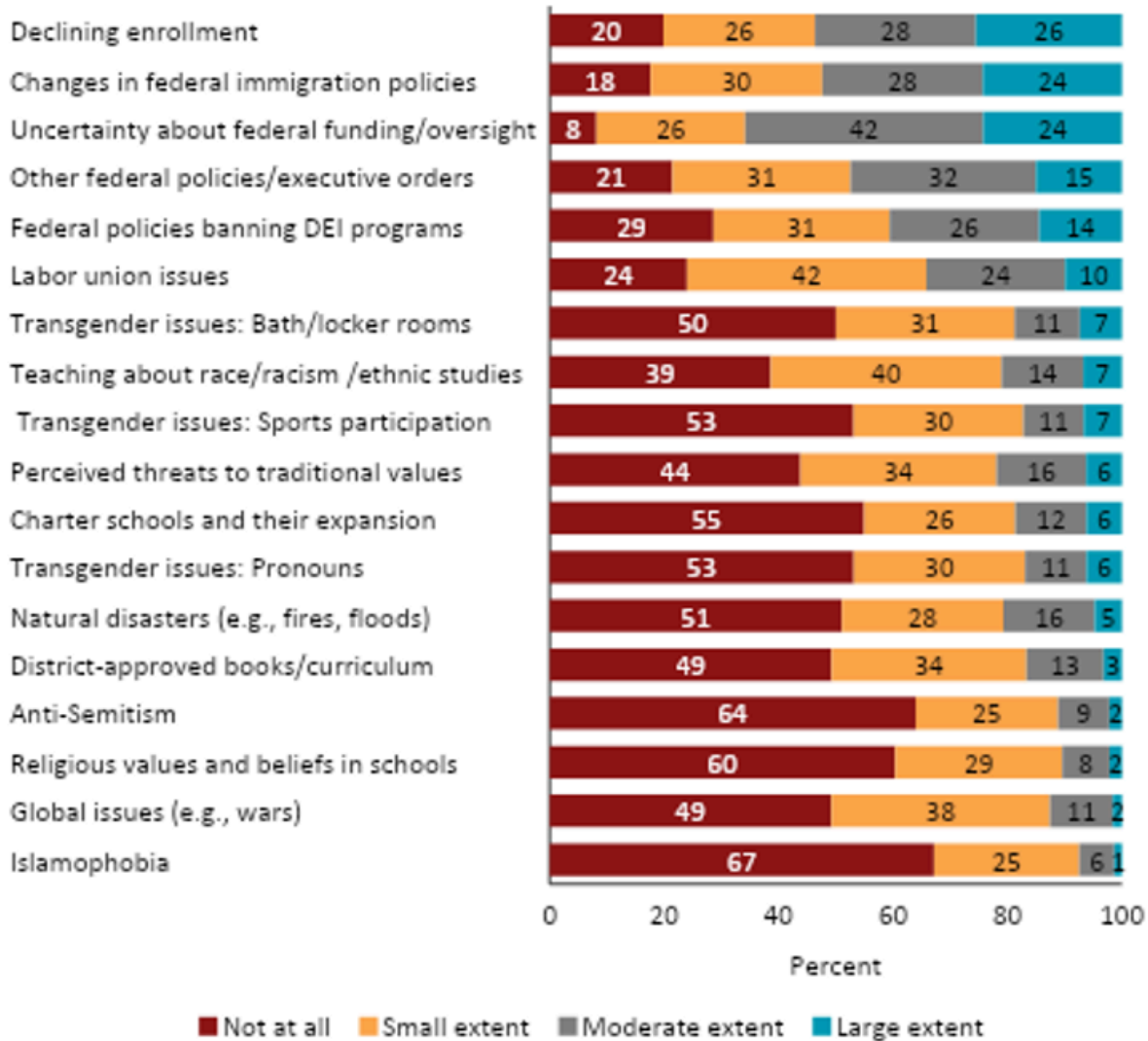
Well-being is developed in an ecosystem, not in isolation. Students and schools exist in a larger sociohistorical, cultural, and political context and these elements shape student well-being. For example, the current economic context of California influences both parent and student well-being. Fisher et al. find that across the state, material hardship is pervasive and persistent, and as of December 2025, 84 percent of families with young children reported struggling to meet at least one basic need per month. These elevated levels of family stress can have impacts on student well-being as

well, both for young children and adolescents. Indeed, Immordino-Yang and Darling-Hammond emphasize that adolescent learning is shaped by the institutional environments in which individuals develop.

Additionally, federal policy changes affecting immigrant communities and LGBTQ individuals impact how students feel about and approach school. Sun et al. find that a substantial number of LGBTQ+ students experience identity-based bullying and worry about transphobia in college. According to Garcia et al., Latine families seek safety and support from schools, and according to Winn et al., Black families often feel unsupported by their school systems. These findings indicate that California still has more work to do to support historically underserved and marginalized students and families, especially those recently targeted by federal policies.

At the school governance level, Marsh et al. found that federal policy changes also shaped how school board members perceived their work. In their survey of nearly 700 school board members across the state, participants reported that four of the five top sources of strain, tension, or conflict in districts and communities are related to federal policies and funding. **Figure 2** summarizes school board members' reports of the main sources of strain and conflict in their districts and communities, highlighting the salience of federal policy changes.

Figure 2. Sources of Strain, Tension, or Conflict in District and/or Community (n=667)



Note. From Marsh et al.

Implications for California

The research points to four areas where the evidence on student well-being has direct bearing on decisions California is now facing. Across these reports, a common theme is that well-being depends on both concrete supports and relational conditions, and that policies are most likely to succeed when they strengthen both.

Supporting and learning from programs that show promise

California has several bright spots, including community schools and Transitional Kindergarten, but these strategies will depend on continued attention to implementation and improvement if they are to fully realize their promise. The findings point to the value of building on existing strengths to support both well-being and academic learning across multiple student groups. Technical assistance and capacity building are likely to be important if schools are to meet ambitious state goals related to both achievement and student well-being.

More comprehensive data to guide support and improvement

More timely and comprehensive data would make it easier to assess progress on the state's top-priority goals and to understand the effectiveness of major investments over time. Current gaps in data on immigrant-origin students, LGBTQ+ students, and staff working conditions make it difficult to understand the conditions under which students and educators are learning and working. At the same time, any expansion of data collection would need to be designed with careful attention to privacy and potential harm for already vulnerable groups.

Training and concrete supports for relationship-centered practice

Relationships are foundational to learning, and interventions that support both relationship-building and academic instruction can have strong positive effects. Realizing those effects depends in part on high-quality training and professional development for staff across roles, especially when implementation must be sustained and consistent over time. The evidence also suggests that additional concrete supports for staff and families can strengthen the relational conditions that make learning possible.

Strengthening protections and supports for vulnerable learners

California has an opportunity to strengthen supports for whole-child development, particularly for vulnerable students. The evidence suggests that continued attention to culturally sustaining and responsive pedagogy, stronger preparation for working with marginalized student populations, and

sustained protections for vulnerable groups would strengthen California’s position at a time of federal disinvestment and political pressure. The reports also suggest that schools cannot support student well-being in isolation from the broader social, economic, and political contexts that shape students’ lives.

Conclusion

The central implication is that California’s efforts to improve academic outcomes and close opportunity gaps will depend in part on whether schools can strengthen the conditions that support student well-being: safety, belonging, stable relationships, material security, and meaningful opportunities to learn. Academic learning and well-being are best understood as interwoven dimensions of child and adolescent development. This matters especially as California seeks to close longstanding achievement gaps for historically underserved students. The evidence summarized here suggests that continued attention to promising programs, stronger protections for vulnerable learners, and more targeted support for staff and families would strengthen California’s capacity to support student well-being in ways that also advance educational opportunity.

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