

Supporting Buy-In and Addressing Stigma

A Case Study from San Diego County Office of Education



**CAPACITY
GRANT**
CYBHI School-Linked Partnership

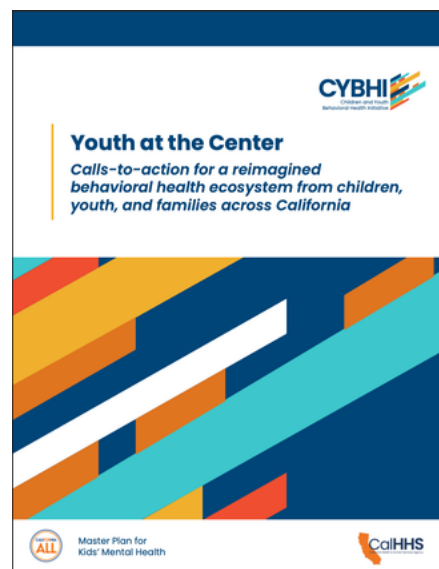
Defining Mental Health Stigma and Research-Based Approaches to Addressing Stigma

In 2023 the Children Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) published the [Youth at the Center](#) report, a report that outlines twelve calls-to-action for reimagining behavioral health ecosystems for children, youth, and families across California. The foundational first step listed in the report is addressing stigma.

Mental health stigma “refers to negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes people may hold towards those who experience mental health conditions.”¹ Mental health stigma can cause individuals to avoid helpful mental health services out of fear that they will be judged by peers or others in the larger community.²

Addressing mental health stigma is an important topic at the student, family, and community levels. Stigma impacts the initial decision individuals make to participate in strategies to improve mental health; and it can be challenging for an individual to agree to pursue a service like therapy when their family or community hold negative views about mental health services.

The [Youth at the Center](#) report outlines that, for youth, mental health stigma was more prevalent in intergenerational relationships with family members, rather than in relation to their peers. Youth described “experiencing stigma for seeking treatment from family members who hadn’t had the opportunity to discuss and address mental health concerns of their own, oftentimes because the adults were focused on meeting basic needs. Parents expressed that a lack of information, resources, and support limited their own understanding of behavioral health challenges and their ability to provide support.”³



A robust body of research exists related to approaches to destigmatizing mental health services (both in school settings and in the broader community). **A recent meta-analysis published in 2025 suggests that destigmatizing mental health among young people is something that can be formally taught.**⁴ Educational approaches include: didactic lectures, distribution of booklets and slideshows, structured courses / workshops, case vignettes or scenario-based techniques, contact-based interventions, video messages, or a combination of these approaches.

In a different meta-analysis from 2012, social contact and nonvideo-based interventions were found to have a larger effect for stigma-related behaviors than educational and video-based approaches.⁵ This means opportunities where students and community members get to directly meet and have discussions with individuals with mental illness are more effective than watching videos or listening to lectures (however, it is important to remember that videos and lectures are still effective at reducing stigma-related behaviors). Some programs (e.g., [In Our Own Voice](#)) offer opportunities for direct contact between people with mental illness and the public.

Funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), some schools have experienced success implementing Well-Being Information and Strategies for Educators (WISE). Developed in partnership with the National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, WISE is a national coalition of organizations and individuals promoting inclusion and support for all affected by mental illness by advancing evidence-based practices for stigma reduction efforts.⁶ WISE offers a series of resources including: a free 3-part training package as part of [Classroom WISE](#), a [Classroom WISE Video Library](#), a [Classroom WISE Resource Collection](#), and [Classroom WISE Implementation](#) (resources to help school teams develop a plan for implementing Classroom WISE).

As Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) across California start to implement the CYBHI Fee Schedule Program, they must navigate how to address mental health stigma meaningfully with their students, families, and staff.

This memo uplifts the experience of San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) in building systems that address stigma in school-based behavioral health settings, and offers ideas for COEs and LEAs to consider in building systems of their own.

San Diego County Office Of Education's Approach to Reducing Stigma



Since 2022, SDCOE has worked with 31 LEAs representing over 440 schools across San Diego County to implement a Mental Health Student Services Act (MHSSA) grant. MHSSA “provides grants for partnerships between county mental health agencies and local education agencies to deliver school-based mental health services to young people and their families. These partnerships support outreach to identify early signs of unmet mental health needs, reduce stigma and discrimination, and prevent unmet mental health needs from becoming severe and disabling.”⁷



SDCOE focused its MHSSA grant funding on supporting LEAs to build their capacity and expertise in suicide prevention, mental health promotion, and stigma reduction. One component of their sustainability approach included using grant funds to contract with subject-matter experts to provide training for existing school staff, rather than hiring temporary, grant-funded staff. SDCOE also supported LEAs in completing annual needs assessments that included identifying strengths and needs related to addressing stigma.

SDCOE developed a robust suite of strategies informed by their LEAs to address mental health stigma. Strategies included:

- **Offering learning opportunities through trainings and webinars.** SDCOE offers a robust suite of educational opportunities for all members of their school communities. Specific examples include:
 - Partnering with Rady Children’s Health to offer an annual webinar series for parents and caregivers. Topics include: school / life balance, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, neuroscience, trauma and resilience, etc.
 - Webinar recordings and slides are available on [SDCOE’s website](#).
 - SDCOE also provides facilitation guides for some webinars to support LEAs in hosting their own parent / caregiver viewing events.
- **Offering regular training opportunities to increase mental health literacy for school staff.**
 - Since 2022, SDCOE trained and certified over 900 school staff in Youth Mental Health First Aid.
 - SDCOE offers a one-hour Mental Health Literacy 101 webinar for school staff to increase knowledge and recognition of mental health disorders, decrease stigma, and promote help-seeking behavior.

- **Distributing posters, guides, and pocket-sized cards.** SDCOE has created numerous communication materials to spread awareness about mental health and ensure students and families have access to resources. Key materials include:

- [AB748 Posters](#): In response to AB748, legislation that requires each school site serving students in grades 6 to 12 to create a poster that identifies approaches and shares resources regarding student mental health, SDCOE partnered with youth to develop a selection of posters that schools can easily print and post.



Example: Coping with Anxiety Card

- [Teen Guide to Mental Health and Wellness \(Spanish\)](#): This guide is co-created with youth and regularly updated with new resources to ensure middle and high school students have access to helplines, learning opportunities, and recommended apps.
- [Parent Guide to Mental Health and Wellness \(Spanish\)](#): This guide includes links to trainings, helplines, and resources to help parents and caregivers support their child's mental health.
- [Coping with Anxiety Cards](#): This pocket-size card was developed by high school students for their peers and includes a grounding strategy and mental health resources.

- **Coordinating peer-to-peer programming (e.g. suicide prevention peer programs).** SDCOE coordinated the implementation of four distinct, evidence-based mental health and suicide prevention peer programs in over 20 LEAs. These programs include:
 - National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) on Campus and Bring Change to Mind: Student-led clubs that promote mental health awareness and stigma reduction efforts through peer-led activities.
 - Sources of Strength: An upstream approach to suicide prevention that offers elementary school curriculum, training, and resources for middle / high school peer leader campaigns.
 - Hope Squad: A group of students nominated by their peers to talk and learn about mental health, note signs of distress, and connect others to help and hope.

Data shows SDCOE’s efforts have had positive impacts. The California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) results show that LEAs participating in the MHSSA grant have shown improvement in key indicators related to stigma reduction since the 2021-22 school year.

CHKS Indicator	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
People at school talk openly about mental health.	55%	54%	53%	57%
I know where to go or who to contact at school for help when I am very sad, stressed, lonely, or depressed.	66%	66%	66%	74%
Did not get help from a counselor or therapist in past year when needed.	27%	24%	20%	18%
Barriers to talking to counselor / therapist: They wouldn't understand	29%	27%	21%	20%
Barriers to talking to counselor / therapist: People would think there's something wrong with me	23%	20%	16%	16%

On the heels of this successful work, SDCOE shared their commitment to continuing to reduce mental health stigma in school-based settings beyond the MHSSA grant. By braiding and blending current funding opportunities, including the School-Linked Partnership and Capacity Grant and reimbursements from the CYBHI Fee Schedule Program, SDCOE ensures LEAs have a strong foundation for supporting youth in meaningful ways that directly address stigma.



Lessons Learned

SDCOE shared the following key lessons learned supporting stigma reduction efforts:

- **Co-create resources with youth:** Youth know themselves and each other in ways that allow them to communicate and educate each other more effectively than adults may be able to. Co-creating resources with youth makes them more relevant and builds in initial messengers who can help launch the resource to friends and peers.
- **Increase overall mental health literacy:** Stigma reduction is only one part of a broader mental health literacy message. As people become more familiar with and knowledgeable about mental health, stigma can be reduced.
- **This work is time-consuming:** SDCOE noted that the MHSSA grant funding and ability to compensate LEAs for their time and efforts was a key component of the grant’s success as it supported sustainability, buy-in, and staff capacity.



Getting Started

Implementation Considerations

Building on the learnings from SDCOE and the available research on stigma reduction, there are a couple first steps LEAs and COEs might consider on their journey to reducing stigma. This list is not exhaustive, but offers some direction and considerations.

1. Assess Where Stigma Exists in Your School Communities

SDCOE's robust annual needs assessment provides a strong example for how regular assessment of mental health in your communities can inform meaningful continuous improvement towards stigma reduction. A first step towards addressing stigma is working with students, families, and your school communities to identify what stigma may be in play in your school communities. Stigma can present in a multitude of ways; including related to culture, politics, sexual orientation, and gender identities. As the Youth at the Center report highlights, understanding how stigma presents across the school community is critical. "Young people called for a culture shift that actively promoted mental health by normalizing rest, restorative practices, healing, therapy, peer support, cultural practices, and community care – **not only for a young person who was struggling, but for everyone** – as the way to not just end stigma but to change the social norms that drive stigma in the first place." ***It is important to have an understanding of how stigma is impacting your local school communities in order to best address it.***

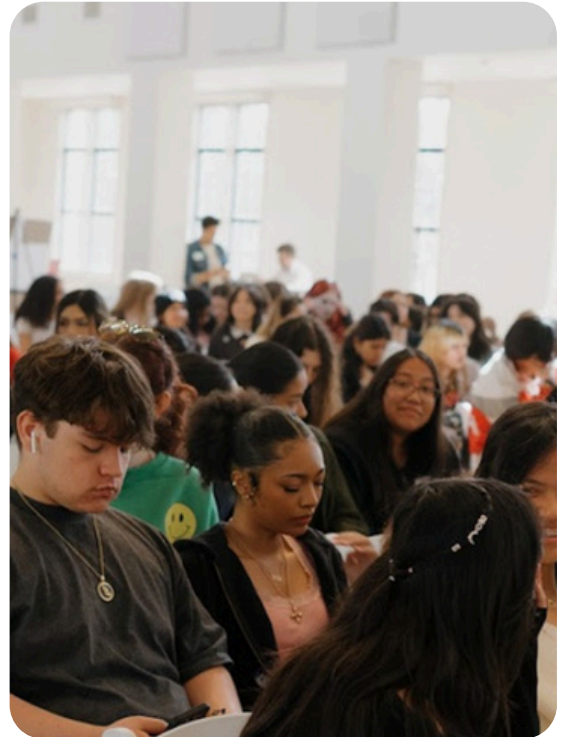
Consider

- What are strategies for collecting information about perceptions around mental health in my community? What baseline information are we already collecting that might inform initial strategies toward reducing stigma? (e.g., California Healthy Kids Survey including their Behavioral Health Module, Panorama survey)
- What potential stigma may be influencing students? Families? Staff? Consider: political climate,⁸ cultural influences, religious impacts, gender / sexual orientation, language barriers, etc.
- What are the opportunities to communicate about mental health and stigma reduction?

The [Youth at the Center](#) report offers additional questions that may help guide COEs and LEAs in assessing how they can address stigma in their local communities.

2. Bring Youth to the Forefront of Messaging and Planning Around Mental Health Stigma

Part of SDCOE’s success around stigma reduction has been the incorporation of youth voice and participation in developing meaningful materials around student mental health. Youth are the experts in how they like to be communicated with and what messages resonate most. A January 2026 report by the [Public Policy Institute of California](#) supports this approach stating: “Reluctance to access professional help also highlights challenges around trust, stigma, and mental health literacy; schools may need to do more to clearly communicate available services, normalize their use, and build confidence in the community. ***Innovative approaches—such as peer-to-peer support programs in schools—offer promising models for meeting teens where they are.***”



Consider

- How can our LEA / COE invite youth to participate in decision making around mental health services and supports?
- What student-led clubs / organizations can be tapped to support messaging and material development around mental health?
- Where are their opportunities to embed mental health into student-led activities?
- What assets do our students bring to the table, and how can we empower them to become spokespeople for youth mental health?
- How might engagement look different for elementary, middle, and high schoolers?



Endnotes

Defining Mental Health Stigma and Research-Based Approaches to Addressing Stigma

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San Diego COE's Approach to Reducing Stigma

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Getting Started

1. For more information on political climate and youth mental health, see here: https://files.elfsightcdn.com/eafe4a4d-3436-495d-b748-5bdce62d911d/302f3330-6cac-477b-9e6c-01ff083ddcc0/YMHT-Politics_and_MentalHealth_06262025final.pdf
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