

**PEER
TO
PEER**

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH



HIGH SCHOOL PILOT DEMONSTRATION
YEAR ONE FINDINGS



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YEAR ONE FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The social and emotional well-being of California’s students has come under increasing strain in recent years. From COVID-related isolation to rising rates of anxiety and trauma exposure, students are navigating complex challenges, often without adequate mental health support.

In response, peer support and peer-to-peer mentoring have emerged as promising, evidence-based approaches for enhancing student engagement, destigmatizing mental health services and fostering a sense of community.

To better understand and expand the potential of these approaches, BBDKSM, in partnership with The Children’s Partnership, is conducting an expansive evaluation of a high school peer-to-peer mental health pilot demonstration across eight diverse high school sites in California: Sierra Continuation, Da Vinci RISE, Mission Hills, Serrano, Oakland Technical, Nevada Union, El Cerrito and Antioch. This report aims to share key themes and findings from Year 1 of the pilot demonstration. This report is one of several to be released during the evaluation of the pilot ahead of the final evaluation report.

The following table provides a comparative snapshot of each high school site in the pilot, highlighting its unique focus areas, levels of community and staffing support, and grant award amounts.

INVESTING IN STUDENT WELLNESS ACROSS CALIFORNIA

\$1,151,967

Antioch High School

TRADITIONAL
Antioch, CA

Key Focus Areas

Peer counseling training, conflict mediation, peer intervention and wellness walks

Community-building circles and restorative practices trainings

Community/Staffing Support

Established programming

Collaboration with local community consulting firms to support data collection and evaluation

\$1,488,500

Nevada Union High School

TRADITIONAL
Grass Valley, CA

Key Focus Areas

Youth-led alternatives to suspension, peer mediation, harm reparation and restorative circles

Harm reduction on substance use

Community/Staffing Support

District-funded salaries for staff and integration of grant funds

Community partnerships and referrals

\$1,090,855

Serrano High School

TRADITIONAL
Phelan, CA

Key Focus Areas

Traditional peer support with daily interventions

Bilingual peer-to-peer mentoring support

Circle keeping

De-escalation training

Community/Staffing Support

Strong teacher recommendations and a peer support model

\$540,805

SIERRA HIGH SCHOOL

CONTINUATION SCHOOL
San Bernardino, CA

Key Focus Areas

Peer leadership, substance use prevention, mental health awareness and conflict mediation

Community/Staffing Support

Partnerships with local organizations and dedicated wellness spaces

\$741,262

El Cerrito High School

TRADITIONAL
El Cerrito, CA

Key Focus Areas

Peer support coupled with wellness space redesign, student leadership and peer-to-peer conflict training

Community/Staffing Support

Active partnerships with external creative/design partners and community partnerships

Mental health and medical services on site

\$945,805

Oakland Tech High School

TRADITIONAL
Oakland, CA

Key Focus Areas

Mini wellness center, restorative practices and conflict mediation

Community/Staffing Support

Strong relationships with parents and broader community and effective use of refurbished space

\$540,805

Da Vinci RISE School

HYBRID INDEPENDENT
STUDY LEARNING
Hawthorne, CA

Key Focus Areas

Adolescent mental health, leadership training, de-escalation training, restorative justice, apprenticeship and podcasting initiatives

Community/Staffing Support

Significant support from community partnerships and mental health promotion through the arts

Development of relationships with El Cerrito Community College and Loyola Marymount for certification

\$1,500,000

Mission Hills High School

TRADITIONAL
San Marcos, CA

Key Focus Areas

Peer counseling, wellness center design, developing healthy relationships, active listening and conflict mediation

Community/Staffing Support

Significant support from Cal State San Marcos, along with coordination with district counselors and administrative backing

Together, these eight sites illustrate the diverse ways peer-to-peer mentorship models are being adapted to local contexts, providing valuable insights into how schools across California can enhance student well-being through community-driven support after only one year of implementation of a three-year pilot.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGIES

Evaluating the impact of the peer-to-peer pilot demonstration requires more than tracking outcomes; it demands a careful exploration of how context, relationships and lived experiences shape change. This findings report draws on the realist evaluation framework to investigate not only whether these initiatives work but how and why they succeed in different school environments.

By centering the voices of students, educators and families, and grounding findings in both qualitative and theory-driven methods, the evaluation provides a nuanced understanding of what enables peer mentoring and support programs to thrive, where barriers persist, and how scalable models can be strengthened to better serve California's diverse student populations.

Guided by the realist evaluation framework, a theory-driven approach that explores what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and how, this evaluation recognizes that programs operate differently depending on local contexts, social conditions and the individuals involved. By applying the context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) framework, we aim to understand how specific elements of peer support and mentoring lead to meaningful change within diverse school environments.

To deepen this analysis, BBDKSM employs qualitative methodologies including thematic analysis and grounded theory, ensuring that findings are rooted in the lived experiences of students, educators and families. This comprehensive evaluation not only identifies scalable best practices but also highlights the barriers and opportunities needed to embed peer-to-peer programs into California's broader educational and mental health support systems.



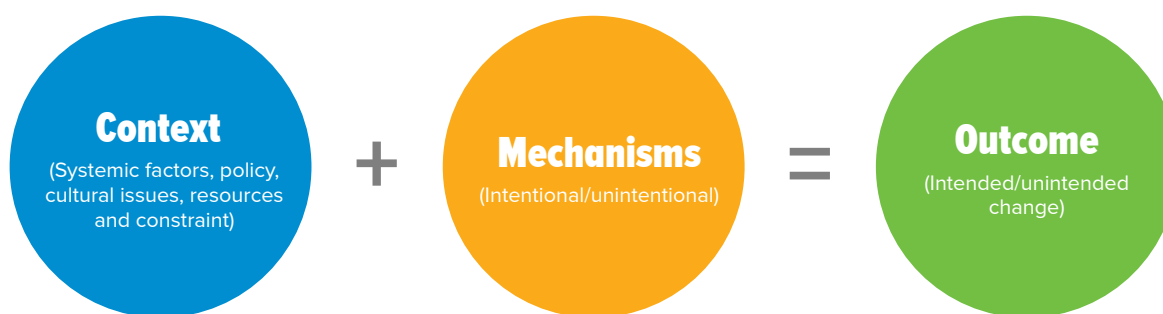
APPLYING THE REALIST (CMO) FRAMEWORK

At the heart of this evaluation is the **CMO configuration**:

- **Context (C):** The school environment, student population or cultural norms in which the program operates.
- **Mechanism (M):** The underlying processes, responses and shifts that the program activates in participants.
- **Outcome (O):** The observable and reported results of those mechanisms, within specific contexts.

CMO Framework Visual Introduction

The visual below illustrates how different school environments (contexts) activate or suppress specific mechanisms (such as identity affirmation, peer modeling or emotional regulation), ultimately leading to distinct outcomes, including improved self-esteem and academic motivation. This visual is not just a map — it's a tool for understanding the variable pathways of program success.



Source: [Providers' insight into quality mental health services](#) — Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) approach¹.

This framework is particularly valuable in peer-based interventions, where personal relationships and cultural context significantly influence impact. For example, trust-building mechanisms are more robust in schools with prior trauma-informed practices, demonstrating how context is inseparable from effect.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis helped surface cross-site patterns and shared experiences. It enabled evaluators to organize qualitative data into coherent themes, such as relational trust, agency, belonging and conflict resolution, while also identifying school-specific adaptations that influenced the delivery of peer-to-peer mentoring.

Themes included:

- Students feeling “seen” and heard for the first time
- Mentors developing leadership identities
- Faculty witnessing improvements in school culture
- Interest in pursuing careers and additional training in the mental health field and higher education

Thematic analysis proved particularly effective in identifying the mechanisms that were repeated across contexts and those that only flourished under specific conditions.

1. Context-Mechanism-Outcome Framework <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/realist-evaluation#:~:text=Once%20patterns%20of%20outcomes%20are,light%20of%20the%20evaluation%20findings>

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory supported the development of mid-range theories that align well with realist principles. As evaluators coded data, emergent ideas about mentoring's core mechanisms were refined and tested across multiple data sources. These theories, such as “mirroring and modeling” or “structured vulnerability,” help clarify *how change occurs* and guide future program replication in various school settings.

Theoretical Framework: Realist Evaluation

Realist evaluation is built on the premise that *outcomes are generated through mechanisms that are triggered in specific contexts*. This means success isn't merely a matter of applying a good model — it's about how that model interacts with local environments, histories and individual experiences.

Key tenets include:

- **Generative causation:** Programs don't cause change directly; they create conditions that trigger mechanisms.
- **Situated learning:** Context deeply shapes participant behavior and receptivity.
- **Contingent success:** The same program may produce different outcomes depending on the setting.

In this evaluation, for example, peer-to-peer support triggered a *mechanism of self-reflection* in students who had prior trauma counseling (context), leading to higher self-awareness (outcome). In other schools with fewer mental health supports, the same peer support format produced more modest effects. These distinctions are essential for program refinement and policy alignment.

The findings report will integrate narrative, visual and evidence-based findings to support adaptive implementation, program fidelity, scalable impact and policy advocacy.

Data Collection: Site Visits, Narrative and Financial Reports

As part of this report, BBDKSM has conducted both virtual and in-person evaluations at all participating school sites, including Sierra Continuation, Da Vinci RISE, Mission Hills, Serrano, Oakland Technical, Nevada Union, El Cerrito and Antioch. Between January and February 2025, we conducted virtual interviews with program leaders and stakeholders, which shed light on key aspects such as program design, training structures, implementation challenges and early signs of success. Additionally, the January and July narrative and impact reports were reviewed as part of this phase and are reflected in the report.

From February 24 to March 6, 2025, in-person site visits deepened our understanding by incorporating:

- **Focus groups** with peer mentors, mentees, teachers and caregivers
- **Direct observation** of mentoring interactions and programming
- **Surveys** measuring satisfaction, relational dynamics and perceived outcomes

These site visits provided vital contextual insight, allowing evaluators to witness how environments shape program experiences. Realist evaluation holds that these contexts are not merely background noise; they actively condition which mechanisms are activated and what outcomes are possible.

SITE VISIT DEFINITIONS AND ROLE CLARIFICATIONS

Within the specific peer-to-peer programs evaluated across the eight pilot school sites in this study, it is important to clarify that terms such as “peer mentor” and “peer support” are not intended to reflect universal definitions but rather reflect how roles have been defined and operationalized at these particular sites. At several of the sites, “peer mentors” are students who are trained to provide guidance, information and connections to resources for their peers and typically take on a more structured, coaching-oriented role. In contrast, “peer support” generally refers to more mutual and reciprocal relationships, where students engage with one another based on shared experiences, emotional support and collective understanding. While both approaches contribute meaningfully to student well-being, clearly distinguishing between them, especially within localized program contexts, is critical to accurately evaluating their function and impact.

In this findings report, the following definitions apply:

PEER-MENTOR

A peer-mentor is an individual who provides guidance, support and encouragement to another participant in the program. They typically have more experience in a specific area and help their mentee develop skills, navigate challenges and achieve personal or professional goals.



PEER

A peer refers to someone of similar status, background or experience level who participates in a mutual support system within the program. In a peer-to-peer setting, both individuals can learn from each other, fostering a collaborative and reciprocal learning environment.

KEY FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS

Peer-to-peer programs across the eight pilot sites, while varied, consistently focus on youth leadership and development. These programs offer diverse opportunities, including academic and college credit courses, certifications and extensive training in restorative practices. Despite their differences, they share the common goals of reducing mental health stigma, fostering a sense of belonging and providing supportive alternatives to traditional disciplinary methods like in-school suspension.



PROGRAM MODELS

While each program reflects its local context, they all share a commitment to youth leadership. Some schools have structured peer counseling courses integrated into the curriculum, while others operate drop-in wellness centers, where students can seek support and participate in restorative circles. Some school sites use peer support as an alternative to suspension, leaning more toward restorative, peer-led practices and less punitive approaches to student behavior. Regardless of approach, students play a central role in driving activities and shaping supportive spaces.



Program objectives:

All programs aim to support students through peer-to-peer mentorship, providing them with the necessary guidance and support. Their primary objectives include fostering community, reducing stigma surrounding mental health, promoting conflict resolution, offering alternatives to traditional disciplinary actions, and providing students with exposure to careers in the mental health field.



Model Variations:

Some sites also operate out of a wellness center, where students access quiet and healing spaces, engage in restorative circles, receive one-on-one counseling and participate in peer-intervention education.



Programs are often designed to be youth led, encouraging students to take ownership in both support activities and decision-making.



Peer-to-peer mentoring is a semester-level course that allows participants to earn college-level credits from one of the local colleges or universities.

STUDENT TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

A key element of each program is robust training. Peer mentors are equipped with skills in active listening, effective communication, conflict mediation and trauma-informed care. In many cases, students receive certificates or even academic credit, reinforcing the value and rigor of their training.



Content: Students receive training in active listening, communication skills, restorative practices, mindfulness, Tobacco Use Prevention Education (T.U.P.E.), racial equity, conflict mediation, mental health first aid and trauma-informed care.



Approach: Training methods include role-plays, mock circles, one-on-one practice sessions, and occasionally formal two-day training sessions and overnight team-building retreats.



Outcomes: Program participants receive certificates or badges recognizing their competence as peer mentors or mediators. Some even integrate peer training with academic credits or professional pathways.

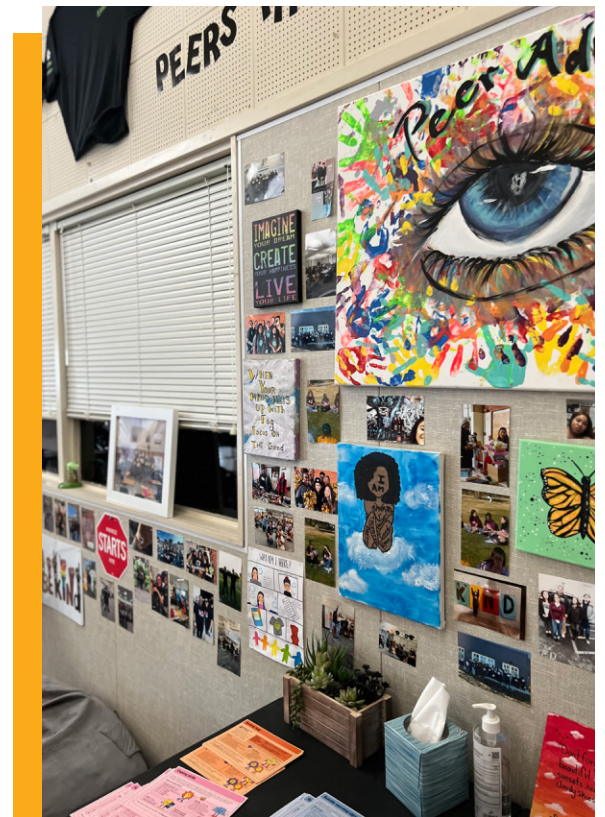
PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION

Components:

- ✓ Regular peer meetings (often twice weekly)
- ✓ Restorative circles and conflict mediation sessions
- ✓ Structured one-on-one support engagements
- ✓ Quarter-long course²
- ✓ Additional activities, such as wellness walks and community engagement projects

Setting:

Programs are typically embedded within the school environment — in dedicated classrooms, remodeled wellness centers or designated spaces (e.g., “Zen den” or outdoor areas in some sites).



2. Some high schools participating in the peer-to-peer pilot operate outside of the traditional quarter system.



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Strong partnerships enhance program quality and sustainability. Schools collaborate with local universities, nonprofit organizations and community health agencies to expand training opportunities and secure additional funding.

Throughout the virtual site visits, it was evident that peer-to-peer mentoring is an invaluable resource in each school community. Students, staff and partners consistently highlighted the transformative impact these programs have on fostering belonging, building resilience and nurturing leadership among young people. While challenges persist, the shared commitment to restorative, student-led approaches positions these programs as powerful models for other schools seeking to improve school climate and student well-being.



Partners: Sites collaborate with local universities, community health organizations, nonprofits and vendors (e.g., El Camino College, YMCA, California School-Based Health Alliance, StudioFive10, Youth Leadership Institute, and creative and design partners).



Role: These partnerships provide training to peers, offer technical assistance, support vendor contracts (e.g., for space redesign), and sometimes even assist with stipends or data reporting and evaluation.



Impact: Community input also shapes program adaptations, such as language diversity, culturally responsive practices and extracurricular engagement strategies.

SCHOOL SITES' APPROACH TO DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION

Most sites keep records through sign-in sheets and simple pre- and post-program surveys. However, a lack of baseline data, consistent outcome measures and systems for long-term tracking makes it difficult to rigorously detail the full impact of these programs over time.



Methods:

- ✓ Use of sign-in sheets, pre- and post-surveys, Google Forms for visual tracking (e.g., pie charts), third-party evaluators, and grant reporting and internally generated reports for program use.
- ✓ Leveraging school-district-level data to support reporting.
- ✓ Evaluation focusing on both program outcomes (like improved school climate, enhanced student attendance and leadership growth) and individual student progress.

Challenges:

- ✓ Difficulty aligning school-wide metrics with the program's direct impact.
- ✓ Differing systems between partner agencies and school district reporting that sometimes hamper data integration.
- ✓ Need for more refined templates and external evaluators in some cases.
- ✓ Mentees completing feedback survey after utilizing services.
- ✓ Access to district/school-wide data.



OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Recruitment strategies are multifaceted, combining teacher referrals, classroom presentations and social media outreach. Programs make deliberate efforts to reach a broad and diverse student population, although achieving fully representative participation remains an ongoing goal.

Approaches:



Teacher and administrator recommendations, classroom presentations, a formal application process for peers and student interviews.



Use of social media, podcasts, placement of QR-coded flyers in high-traffic areas and direct engagement at clubs or assemblies.

Results:



Most sites report strong interest and high student participation, although challenges include addressing attendance issues (often tied to truancy or COVID-related disruptions) and ensuring diverse representation. Peer mentors are adapting their marketing and outreach strategies to account for this.



Students show deep interest in becoming peer mentors.



Students overwhelmingly choose to leverage peer-to-peer mentoring versus in-school suspension when presented with a choice. When students participate in peer-led restorative circles, they often mention feeling heard and seen after meeting with their peer mentor.

Supports needed:



Enhanced communication channels between peer mentors and peers.



Better integration of recruitment strategies across various student groups (e.g., bilingual students, non-binary and male students, limited-English proficient students).



PILOT DEMONSTRATION SPENDING INSIGHTS

Across the eight sites, schools were able to leverage grant dollars to hire staff, provide additional technical assistance, provide stipends for students, renovate and build their wellness centers, and cover additional operational costs. Overall, school sites have budgeted between 56% and 78% of their budgets for staffing to cover salaries and consultant support.

- **Staffing and consultant support:** Some grantees (e.g., Antioch, Mission Hills) prioritized direct staffing, while others (e.g., RISE, Sierra) relied on consultants to support the execution of their programs. By accessing grant funds through this pilot, sites have been able to offer various models for staffing a peer-to-peer mentorship program, supported by consultants, university partners and statewide resources in the form of curriculum and training.
- **Program development and delivery:** Early investments in curriculum and training (RISE and Sierra) suggest the significant resources required to launch a peer-to-peer mentorship program, whereas longer-standing programs (Antioch and El Cerrito) have more flexibility in their budgets to spend toward other operational costs and student stipends.
- **Student stipends and incentives:** Only a small subset of grantees (Sierra and El Cerrito) spent their grant funding on stipends and incentives, which could suggest challenges in sites compensating their peer mentors due to restrictions from the school district.

SCHOOL-WIDE MEASURES: PARTICIPATION AND REACH

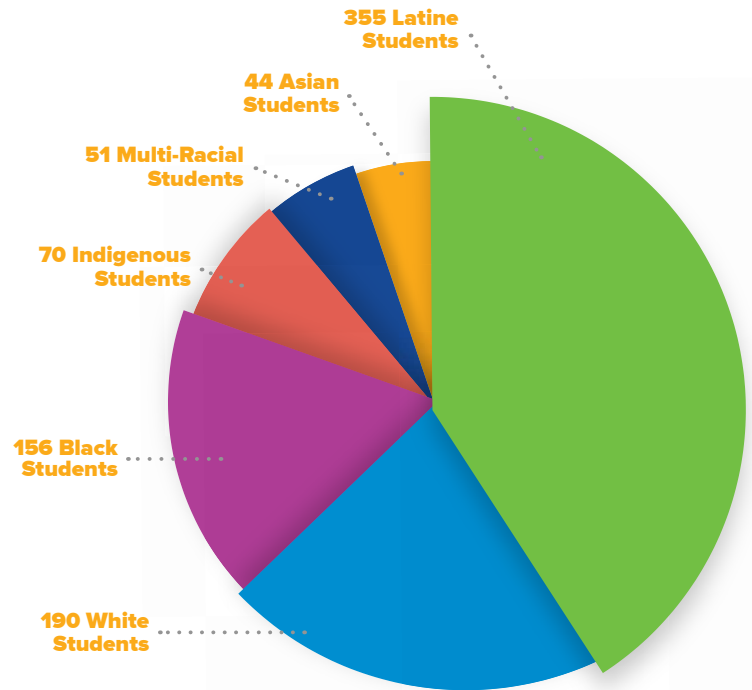
In Year 1, a total of

936 STUDENTS

used peer-to-peer services at least once across sites, demonstrating meaningful uptake.

Racial & Ethnic Breakdowns

- Most extensive participation was among and white students (190), followed by Black students (156).
- Across school sites, second-most participation was seen among Asian students (44), Indigenous students (70) and multiracial students (51).
- Pacific Islander (5) and Middle Eastern and North African (0) participation remained limited, raising questions about how race is categorized at the school site, accessibility and outreach to these student populations.



Gender Identity

- The majority of users (516) were female students.
- Male students (305) made up a significant portion but notably fewer than female students.
- Participation among non-binary students (39) and students who chose not to self-identify (76) reflects both inclusivity and gaps in identity tracking.

Peer Leaders and Engagement

- A total of 140 students served as peer support leaders, with some schools mobilizing 20-40 peer leaders, while others had fewer than 15.
- Repeat engagement (students returning for multiple sessions) varied widely: Some schools had 0% return rates, while others had 68%-100%, suggesting large differences in program quality or student trust.

Impact on Students

- **The vast majority of students (96%) reported feeling better after they had utilized peer support services.**
- Escalation to professional staff was reported at 35%-46% in some sites, indicating that peer support often serves as a gateway to professional mental health services. However, other sites reported 2% or 0%, suggesting either under-referral or sufficient support at the peer level.
- Language access remains limited, with only 2%-8% of services being delivered in Spanish or another language, indicating an opportunity to expand linguistic inclusivity.

Chronic Absenteeism

Absenteeism varied across sites, which reflects the different types of school sites participating in the pilot, such as traditional schools, continuation schools and independent study high schools.



Behavioral Health and Crisis Response

- Calls to external psychiatric response teams were minimal at some sites (as few as 1-2 per semester). Still, they reached 68 calls at one school, underscoring a stark difference in student behavioral health needs, challenges in the broader community surrounding the site and crisis management infrastructure.
- Behavior referrals followed a similar pattern: Some sites reported fewer than 3%, while others faced rates exceeding 40%-58%. This indicates significant disparities in school climate and student behavioral challenges.

Counseling Staff Capacity

- On average, schools reported 7.9 mental health counselors and 4.4 academic/college counselors on staff or contracted, showing that most schools had some level of professional support.
- However, the ratios still reveal differences in resource allocation: Some schools had only 1-2 counselors, while others had 10-12, suggesting uneven student-to-counselor access across sites.



Student Perceptions

- Positive attitudes toward behavioral health ranged from 56.8% to 81%, showing moderate but varied confidence among students.
- A sense of belonging averaged 60%, with highs of 80% but lows of 43%, indicating that some schools have inclusive climates while others struggle to foster a sense of belonging.
- **Students' perceived access to behavioral health resources averaged 76.7%, with a high of 84%, indicating that when supports exist, they are recognized and utilized.**

Discipline

- Suspension rates averaged 6.3%, but with variation: Some schools reported rates of 0%-2%, while one reported a rate of 25%, demonstrating the range of disciplinary practices across school sites.
- **Expulsions were generally negligible, averaging 0.19%, suggesting that most schools rely on other interventions rather than exclusionary discipline.**

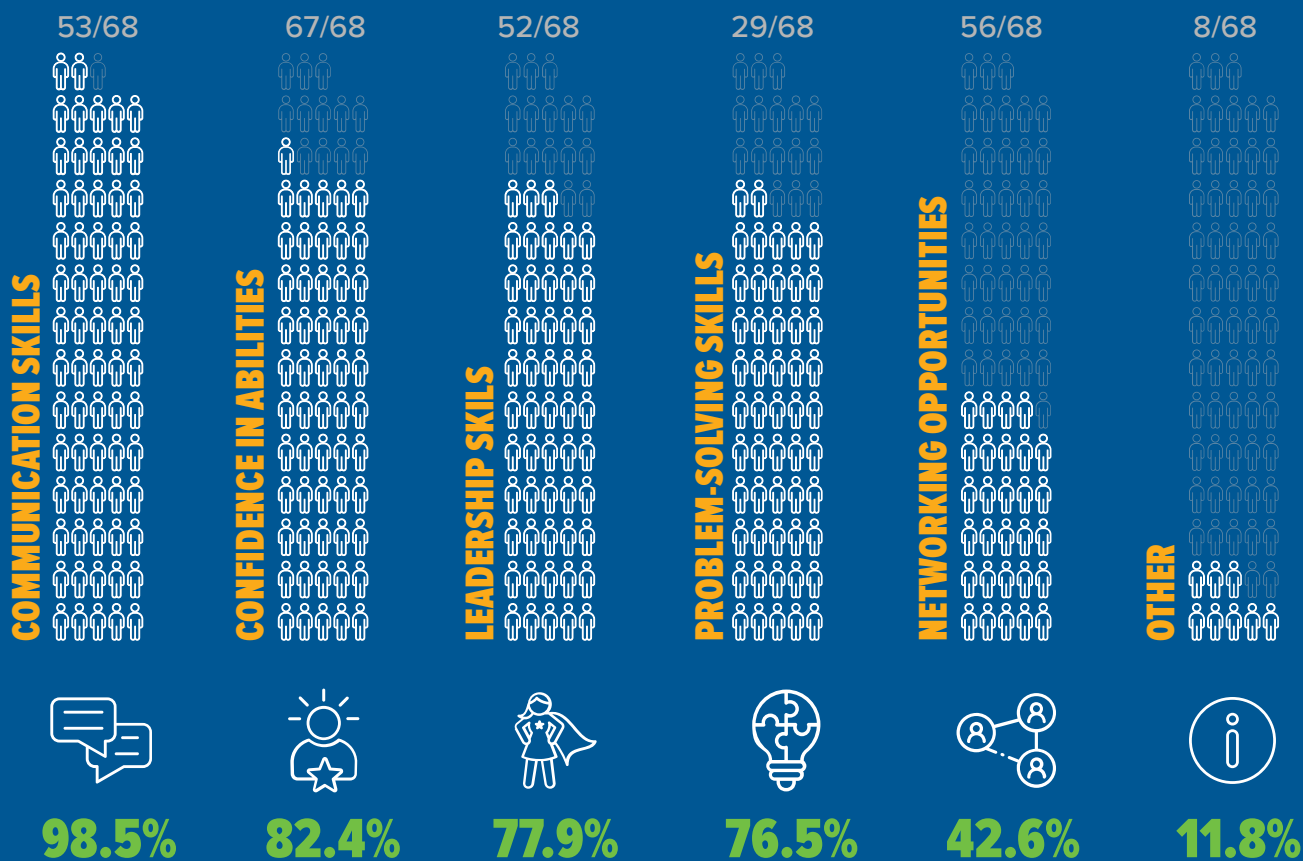
SCHOOL SITE VISIT SURVEY DATA

1. Students gain confidence and communication skills through active involvement in wellness programs

The analysis reveals that student-driven initiatives have a significant impact on enhancing self-efficacy among participants. Many students reported that their involvement in wellness programs had fostered deeper engagement and accountability, as well as improved communication skills, with weekly check-ins being particularly beneficial. This is the first time for many students to take on leadership roles, and their self-efficacy has been growing immensely as a result.

Sources: Focus groups, direct observations and surveys from February 24 to March 6, 2025.

Has the Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Program helped you develop new skills or gain new knowledge?



Source: Over 81 peer mentors were surveyed during the in-person site visits conducted from February to March 2025.

Students are showing increased self-efficacy and leadership skills through participation in peer-to-peer mentorship, indicating a positive shift in their engagement levels.

“Student-driven initiatives foster deeper engagement. Weekly check-ins help with accountability and support. This is the first time for the majority to ever be in leadership roles. Their self-efficacy has been growing immensely.”

Despite still undergoing training, ambassadors have shown initiative by stepping into leadership roles during crises, demonstrating their commitment.

“Peer mentors showed initiative by stepping into leadership roles and creating a safe space for grieving students. This highlighted their potential as peer leaders.”

Students’ eagerness to take leadership roles indicates a strong potential for the success of the peer-to-peer mentorship program.

“Students’ eagerness to take leadership roles signals strong potential for the program’s success.”

2. Students express strong desire to engage in peer mentor roles

Sources: Focus groups, direct observations and surveys from February 24 to March 6, 2025.

Student interest in becoming a peer mentor is evenly distributed, indicating a need for more information to drive engagement.

“60% of students reported feeling very or somewhat comfortable seeking mental health support from a peer.”

3. There is a clear desire among students for an on-campus wellness center, reflecting a need for dedicated mental health resources within the school environment

“Students expressed a desire to meet with their peers and engage in supportive conversations.”

4. Funding delays hinder timely implementation of mentorship programs

This section highlights the challenges schools face in accessing their grant funding and the resulting impact on their peer-to-peer programming. This pilot evaluation does not delve into local administrative challenges. Overall, this data is intended to provide additional context on the environment the school sites are operating within.

The analysis reveals significant delays in the school sites’ ability to access funds, adversely affecting the timeline for peer mentors to complete training and begin implementation of peer-to-peer mentorship. Consequently, only a fraction of planned sessions have been completed, pushing the target for full implementation to fall 2025. These funding challenges not only impact program start times but also underscore the need for timely and consistent resource allocation to support student mental health and ensure the success of peer-led initiatives. Feedback from peer leaders suggests that students perceive these programs as crucial for offering support during challenging times and for enhancing mental health resources within the school environment.

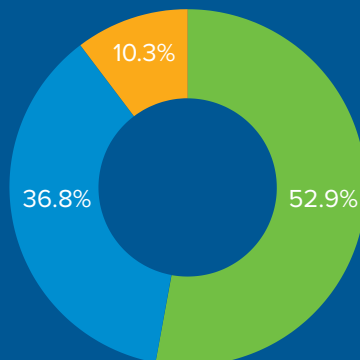
5. Students feel supported and comfortable seeking help

Sources: Over 81 peer mentors and peers were surveyed during the in-person site visits conducted from February to March 2025.



How comfortable did you feel sharing your thoughts, challenges, and goals with your peer-mentor?

- Very Comfortable
- Comfortable
- Neutral
- Uncomfortable
- Very Uncomfortable

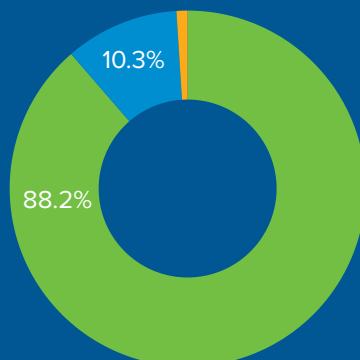


68 responses



Did you feel supported throughout the program?

- Yes, completely supported
- Yes, mostly supported
- Neutral
- No, not much support
- No, I felt unsupported



68 responses

The data shows that over 88% of survey respondents felt comfortable sharing and opening up to their peer mentor. This demonstrates the effectiveness of training for peer mentors and their ability to build strong relationships with peers. Over 98% of peer mentors reported feeling either “completely” or “mostly” supported throughout the program. This speaks to the quality of the curriculum, training, teachers, community-based organizations and other support staff. The data points suggest a considerable portion of students feel at ease seeking mental health assistance from their peers, highlighting the importance of peer-led initiatives. The involvement of peer mentors in coordinating check-ins and grief circles illustrates how effective peer support can be in tackling mental health issues and external crises. Additionally, the growing interest among students in becoming peer mentors reflects an increasing recognition of the importance of peer engagement in mental health efforts, fostering a culture of openness and support within the school community.

6. Increased engagement in restorative practices signals cultural shift

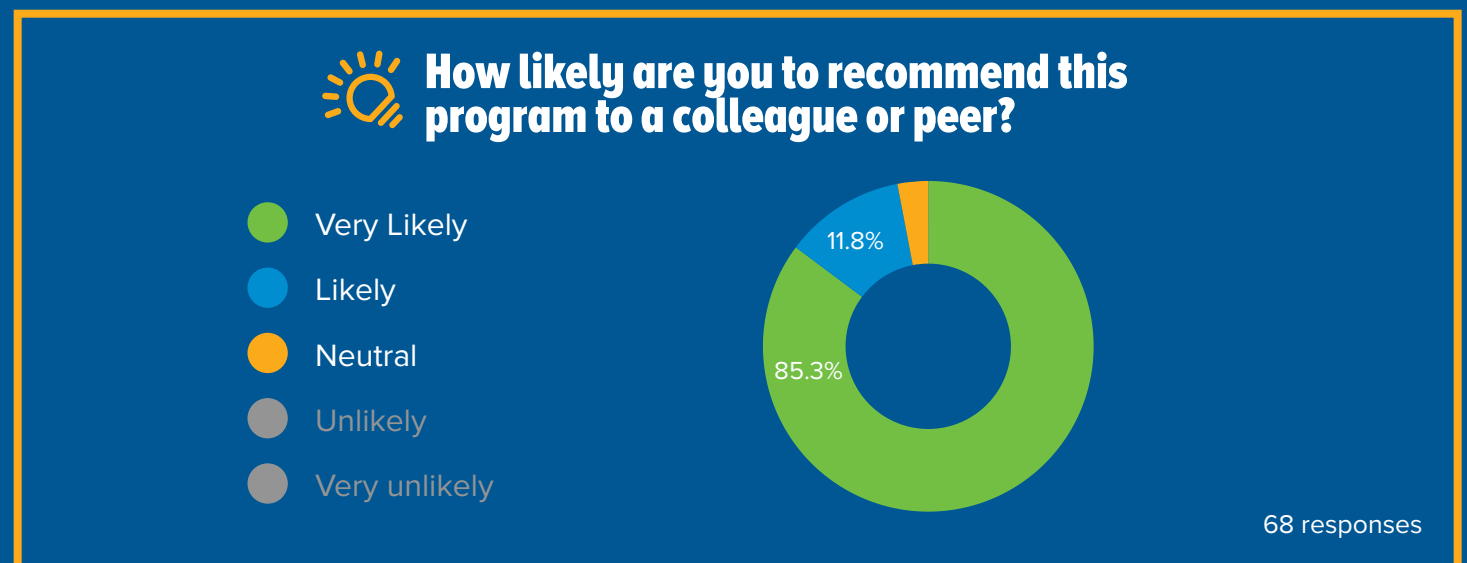
The findings suggest a notable shift toward restorative practices within the school culture. Increased student engagement in these practices, along with positive feedback from recent events, indicates a growing acceptance and implementation of restorative approaches to address conflicts and promote mental health and healthy coping mechanisms.

Sources: Focus groups, direct observations and surveys from February 24 to March 6, 2025

Collaboration with community organizations has improved program efficacy and reach, highlighting the importance of external partnerships.

“Increased student engagement in restorative practices and mental health initiatives has been observed.”

Feedback from administrators and school staff indicates a preference for restorative practices over punitive measures, suggesting a shift in school culture toward more supportive approaches.



Sources: Over 81 peer mentors and peers were surveyed during the in-person site visits conducted from February to March 2025.

7. Growing dialogue on mental health reflects cultural change

The analysis of focus group and interview data indicates a noticeable increase in conversations about mental health among students and staff. This growing dialogue fosters a more open and supportive environment, encouraging students to share their experiences and seek help when needed. Such cultural changes are essential for promoting mental well-being within the school community.

Many students, for example, participating in the Nevada Union Restorative Accountable Youth Solutions (RAYS) program express a strong desire for connection and support within the school environment, indicating that the program fosters a sense of belonging.

“Students have actively participated in their counseling sessions and the harm reduction class, indicating a shift toward openness about mental health.”

8. Students seek additional information on mental health support

The findings reveal that students are eager for more information regarding mental health resources available to them. This desire for knowledge indicates a proactive approach to mental health and highlights the importance of providing accessible information to empower students in seeking help.

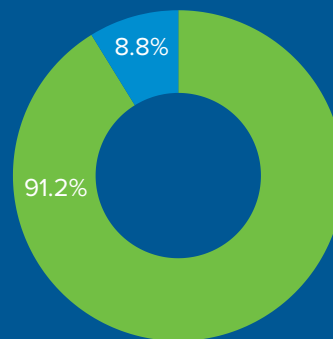
Teachers have reported positive responses from students during classroom presentations, indicating appreciation for mental health resources.

9. Strong engagement in training sessions indicates commitment



How useful were the resources or materials provided to you during the program? (e.g., training, guidelines, webinars)?

- Very useful
- Somewhat useful
- Not useful
- Not applicable



Sources: Over 81 peer mentors and peers were surveyed during the in-person site visits conducted from February to March 2025.

The analysis reveals that peer mentors gain significant benefits from their training in the mentorship program. This training improves their effectiveness as peer mentors and is also helpful in their personal lives. Many peer mentors find various applications for the skills and knowledge they acquire, integrating these learnings into their daily interactions and decisions. Consequently, the training's impact reaches beyond mentorship, fostering the overall development of the peer mentors.

The structured framework for the peer-to-peer mentorship program, including training in active listening and conflict resolution, is essential for equipping students with the necessary skills to support their peers effectively.

“The majority of students participating in the PIE Program report that their peer mentor understood their needs and made the program easy to understand.”



CONCLUSION

The Year 1 findings make clear that when students are equipped with proper training, tools and institutional support, they grow into confident communicators and leaders who help cultivate more inclusive and restorative school climates. Students consistently reported feeling acknowledged, valued and empowered, key foundations for strong well-being and academic engagement. In an era when young people across California are navigating heightened stress, isolation and uncertainty, peer-to-peer mentoring has emerged as a culturally responsive and effective solution that meets students where they are.

These results also demonstrate that peer-led approaches have the power to shift school culture more broadly. With sustained resources, clear policies and targeted investments, programs like these can amplify student voices, foster resilience at scale, and create pipelines into mental health careers particularly critical for Black, Indigenous and other students of color who remain underrepresented in this field. The pilot demonstrates that the combination of student leadership and restorative practices not only supports individual growth but also strengthens the collective fabric of schools and communities.

Building on this momentum, The Children's Partnership launched the Youth Peer Policy Workgroup in summer 2025 to translate these lessons into actionable statewide change. This workgroup, in collaboration with a Youth Advocacy Committee composed of student peers from the pilot sites, will develop a policy strategy informed directly by the findings of this evaluation. The insights shared in this Year 1 report will serve as a foundation for shaping the final set of recommendations on youth-specific peer support in California, to be released at the culmination of the pilot demonstration in fall 2027.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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El Cerrito High School
El Cerrito, CA



Da Vinci RISE High School
El Segundo, CA



Nevada Union High School
Grass Valley, CA



Oakland Technical High School
Oakland, CA



Serrano High School
Phelan, CA



Sierra High School
(Continuation School)
San Bernardino, CA



Mission Hills High School
San Marcos, CA



Antioch High School
Antioch, CA

PEER-TO-PEER PILOT DEMONSTRATION EVALUATION TEAM BIOS

This report was prepared by Dr. Diandra “Dee” Bremond of Dr. Dee Strategies, Folasade Moonsammy of KDSM Consulting LLC, and Kaissa Denis of KDSM Consulting LLC.

Dr. Diandra “Dee” Bremond (she/her/hers)

Dr. Diandra “Dee” Bremond is a data strategist and evaluator skilled at turning complex data into actionable insights for community impact. She is the principal consultant at Dr. Dee Strategies and a senior advisor at Brotherhood Crusade, where she led trauma-informed youth development and co-authored its theory of change with the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. A former USC lecturer and active equity-focused board member, Dr. Bremond holds a master’s in public policy and a doctorate in organizational leadership from Pepperdine University.

Sade Moonsammy (she/her/hers)

Sade Moonsammy has spent over 15 years in nonprofits — as an organizer, facilitator and organizational development professional. She is a partner at KDSM Consulting, a capacity-building firm focused on supporting networks, organizations and funders through transformational change. Before starting KDSM Consulting, Sade was the deputy director and interim executive director of Family Values at Work, a national network supporting 27 states in building the movement for paid leave and child care. In addition to that work, Sade has provided training and facilitation support to nonprofits on organizational development, strategic planning, fundraising, board development and building political campaigns.

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Kaissa Denis, a partner at KDSM Consulting, brings over 15 years of experience in philanthropy, direct services and nonprofit organizations to her role as an evaluator and capacity builder. Previously, at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, she developed and led the capacity-building strategy for over 120 education grantees, establishing one of the first communities of practice at the organization. Her deep expertise spans trauma-informed systems, youth workforce development and multiyear systems evaluation. Kaissa holds a master’s in public policy with a double concentration in economics and international relations from Pepperdine University.

APPENDIX A

School Site Overview

Below is a snapshot of each of the eight participating school sites in the peer-to-peer mentoring pilot program.

Antioch High School

- **Program Name:** Peer Advocate Program
- **Location:** Antioch
- **Student Population:** 1,960
- **Award Amount:** \$1,151,967.50
- [Antioch Restorative Program Website](#)

Da Vinci RISE High

- **Program Name:** Peer-to-Peer Mentoring
- **Location:** El Segundo
- **Student Population:** 198
- **Award Amount:** \$540,805
- [Student Support Services](#)

El Cerrito High School

- **Program Name:** James Morehouse Project Wellness Center
- **Location:** El Cerrito
- **Student Population:** 1,570
- **Award Amount:** \$741,262
- [James Morehouse Project Website](#)

Mission Hills High School

- **Program Name:** Peer Support Mentor program
- **Location:** San Marco
- **Student Population:** 2,854
- **Award Amount:** \$1,500,000
- **Social Media:** [Mission Hills Zen Den](#)

Nevada Union High School

- **Program Name:** RAYS (Restorative Accountable Youth Solutions)
- **Location:** Grass Valley
- **Student Population:** 1,531
- **Award Amount:** \$1,488,500
- [RAYS Program Website](#)

Serrano High School

- **Program Name:** Peer Leaders
- **Location:** Phelan
- **Student Population:** 2,116
- **Award Amount:** \$1,090,855
- [Serrano Peer Leaders Website, Wellness Website](#)
- **Social Media:** [Serrano Peer Leader Program](#)

Sierra High School

- **Program Name:** Sunshine Crew Wellness Ambassador Program
- **Location:** San Bernardino
- **Student Population:** 477
- **Award Amount:** \$540,805
- [Sierra Counseling and Wellness Website](#)
- **Social Media:** [Sierra High School](#)

Oakland Tech High School

- **Program Name:** Peer Support Mentor Program
- **Location:** Oakland
- **Student Population:** 1,800
- **Award Amount:** \$945,805
- **Social Media:** [Oakland Tech](#)

APPENDIX B

Context for California's K-12 Funding Landscape

California's investment in K-12 public education has grown significantly in recent years, creating an opportune environment to prioritize proven, high-impact mental health interventions like peer support.

Historic Funding Growth

In 2023-24, combined state, local and federal funding for California's K-12 public schools is projected at approximately \$131 billion — up from about \$125 billion in 2022-23 (as of July 2024 estimates). Between 2018-19 and 2023-24, total state K-12 funding has increased by nearly 32%.

Federal Contributions and One-Time Aid

The federal government provided \$31 billion in one-time pandemic relief aid for schools. Federal funds accounted for 23% of K-12 funding in 2020-21 and 11% in 2021-22, well above the typical federal share of 6%-9% in non-recession years. These one-time funds would expire if not spent by fall 2024, creating an urgent need for the state to backfill and maintain critical programs previously supported with temporary federal dollars.

State as Primary Funder

Historically, California's state share of K-12 funding has hovered around 55%-60%, with the local share typically near 33%. California's Proposition 98 also establishes a minimum funding guarantee for K-12 public schools, community colleges and some early childhood programs, helping to mitigate some of the funding inequities that result from large regional variations in local property tax revenues. The influx of federal aid during the pandemic temporarily lowered the state share to a 30-year low (51%) in 2020-21; since then, the state share has exceeded 60% for four consecutive years — slightly higher than historical norms.

Per-Pupil Spending

California's per-pupil spending is slightly above the national average but still lags behind other large states like New York and Illinois. In 2021-22, the state spent about \$19,548 per pupil (in 2024 dollars), approximately \$1,800 more than the national average (\$17,783) but far less than New York (\$33,739 per pupil). Adjusted for labor costs, California ranks 34th in per-pupil spending nationally.

Equity Through LCFF

Since 2013-14, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has directed additional funding to districts with higher shares of high-need students (low-income, English learners and foster youth). This has contributed to higher per-pupil spending for underserved groups: In 2022-23, low-income students received \$1,903 more per pupil than higher-income peers; English learners received \$1,073 more; and Black and Latine students received \$2,201 and \$1,670 more per pupil, respectively.

Fiscal Challenges Ahead

Despite record funding, the K-12 system faces significant fiscal headwinds. Declining enrollment will require many districts to downsize operations. Chronic absenteeism, particularly among low-income, Black and Latine students, further affects funding because state allocations are based on average daily attendance rather than enrollment. Rising staffing costs — especially pensions and benefits — continue to put pressure on district budgets. The expiration of federal pandemic stimulus funding in fall 2024 means districts must decide which supports and services can be sustained long-term without these one-time dollars.

