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Authors

Jaramillo Castillo, Adriana

Bishop, Joseph

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Leveraging LCFF Funding to Implement Comprehensive School Counseling:

A Case Study of Livingston
Union School District

Adriana Jaramillo Castillo, M.A.
Joseph Bishop, Ph.D.

UCLA

Center for the Transformation
of Schools

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Caption: A mural in Livingston, CA.

Summary

This research brief explores the Livingston Union School District's (LUSD) implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program. The program aligns with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model and is sustained through California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). Located in California's Central Valley, LUSD serves a predominantly Latine¹ and socioeconomically disadvantaged student population in a high-need, rural context. LUSD bolstered its school counseling program, making it a cornerstone of its student support strategy through collaborative leadership, strategic staffing, and equity-centered resource allocation. Using a mixed-methods approach—including document analysis, stakeholder interviews, survey data, and quantitative outcomes—this study finds that the district's sustained investment in school counseling has led to measurable improvements in school climate and student well-being, alongside reductions in suspension and chronic absenteeism rates, even amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. LUSD's model reinforces a growing body of research demonstrating that lower student-to-counselor ratios and comprehensive, data-informed counseling models improve academic and behavioral outcomes, particularly for historically underserved students. Key findings highlight the importance of program fidelity, clearly defined counselor roles, and continuous stakeholder engagement in realizing the full potential of school counseling. The district's model offers valuable lessons for other school systems seeking to integrate school counseling into broader strategies for educational equity and student success.

Note. 'Latine or Latinx' is a gender-inclusive, non-monolithic, and multi-cultural term for individuals of Mexican, South American, and Central American descent, respectively. For this paper, the terms 'Latinx', 'Latine', and 'Latino(s)' are used interchangeably to describe individuals of Latin-American heritage; However, it is important to note that not all persons of Latin-American origin identify as 'Latino/as', 'Latinx', or 'Latine'. See (Chavez-Moreno, 2021; 2023; Singh, 2025) for more information.



INTRODUCTION

Comprehensive School Counseling in Livingston: An Evidence-Based Approach

In recent years, the role of comprehensive school counseling has gained increasing recognition as a critical lever for advancing educational equity and student well-being, particularly in districts serving diverse and high-need populations (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model offers a research-based framework for designing and implementing comprehensive, preventive, and developmentally appropriate school counseling programs (ASCA, 2019; Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012). However, the effective realization of such programs often hinges on the availability of targeted funding and strategic leadership. In California, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), a needs-based school finance model, has created new opportunities for districts to invest in student support services, including school counseling, to close achievement gaps and promote equitable outcomes (Hatch & Whitson, 2014).

This research brief examines the collaborative, data-driven, and adaptive approaches that underpin Livingston Union School District's (LUSD) counseling program. It situates these practices within the broader context of research on school counseling and its impact on shaping student learning and wellness. A collaborative and continuously evolving counseling

program is essential for meeting the diverse needs of students and advancing educational equity. Research increasingly ties the effectiveness of school counseling programs to their adherence to comprehensive frameworks, such as the ASCA model, and undergoes continuous assessment of program fidelity and student outcomes (Akos et al., 2018; Cholewa et al., 2015). Furthermore, contextual factors, including socioeconomic status and community resources, significantly mediate the relationship between counseling services and student success (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2019). Therefore, this brief also seeks to highlight the significance of these factors in the successful implementation of comprehensive school counseling within LUSD.

Located in the rural city of Livingston in Merced County, California, LUSD serves approximately 2,500 students across four TK-8 schools and two preschool centers (Livingston Union School District, 2025). The district's student body is predominantly Latine (83%), with significant proportions of Asian (12%) and white (3%) students, and over 43% of youth identify as English learners. More than three-quarters of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals (77.5%) during the 2022-23 school year (CDE, 2024). Livingston Union School District's staffing model is distinguished by its integrated teams of teachers, administrators, six full-time school counselors, specialized support staff, and lead counselor Ms. Alma Lopez.

Since the adoption of the state Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013, Superintendent Andrés Zamora has also played a pivotal role in leveraging stakeholder input to prioritize school counseling within the district. He has been committed to expanding counseling services and ensuring counselors are dedicated primarily to student needs rather than administrative functions through the LCFF and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) processes. Ms. Alma Lopez, who has served as a counselor at LUSD since 2006 and as the district's lead counselor since 2015, implemented a comprehensive school counseling program aligned with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) model. The ASCA comprehensive model is a nationally recognized framework that guides the design, delivery, management, and evaluation of school counseling programs. Grounded in four core components—Define, Manage, Deliver, and Assess—the model establishes clear standards for student mindsets and behaviors, emphasizes data-driven decision-making, and requires school counselors to spend the majority of their time providing direct and indirect services to students:

The Four ASCA Model Components

- 1. Define:** Establishes student learning standards and professional/ethical expectations for counselors.
- 2. Manage:** Guides program planning and organization through goal-setting, action plans, and data use.
- 3. Deliver:** Focuses on providing direct (e.g., instruction, counseling) and indirect (e.g., referrals, collaboration) services to students.
- 4. Assess:** Involves ongoing evaluation of both student outcomes and program effectiveness for continual improvement.

By fostering collaboration, promoting mental health, and ensuring culturally responsive practices, the ASCA model creates equitable support systems that advance students' academic, career, and social/emotional development. Livingston's implementation of the ASCA model uses instructional strategies incorporating school counselors and small counselor-to-student ratios at each school site, ensuring individualized student support (Livingston Union School District, 2021–2022). Furthermore, the district's instructional strategies emphasize college and career readiness, equipping all students with the tools for successful post-secondary transitions (Livingston Union School District, 2024). Moreover, Livingston actively cultivates a positive school climate, recognizing that a strong sense of belonging and safety are foundational for fostering student engagement and maximizing learning outcomes (Livingston Union School District, 2024; Livingston Union School District, 2021–2022).

The significance of LUSD's approach is further highlighted by a growing body of research demonstrating the potential impact of comprehensive school counseling strategies on student outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that effective school counseling, characterized by lower student-to-counselor ratios and comprehensive, data-driven programs aligned with the ASCA model, positively impacts student outcomes, especially for underserved populations (ASCA, 2023a; Lapan, 2018; Sparks & Mulhern, 2024). However, achieving these outcomes requires a clear definition of roles for counselors, program fidelity, and strategic resource allocation (ASCA 2023b; Lapan, 2018; Sparks & Mulhern, 2024).

ASCA Student Standards and Program Elements

- **ASCA Student Standards:** Utilizing the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success as a framework for developing and implementing the program, according to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).
- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** Using data to identify student needs, track progress, and evaluate the program's effectiveness, according to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).
- **Collaboration:** Working with teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders to create a supportive school environment and address student needs.
- **Mental Health Support:** Providing students with mental health awareness, promoting positive behaviors, and offering short-term counseling and referrals for mental health concerns, according to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).
- **Culturally Responsive Practices:** Implementing culturally sensitive and inclusive practices to ensure all students feel safe, supported, and valued.

ASCA National Model

The ASCA Model's four-component framework—Define, Manage, Deliver, Assess—sets student learning standards (mindsets and behaviors), organizes program planning and goals, prioritizes direct and indirect services, and embeds continuous evaluation to document impact (American School Counselor Association, 2019). ASCA recommends that 80% or more of counselors' time be devoted to direct and indirect services (American School Counselor Association, 2019), and research associates comprehensive implementation with improved attendance, discipline, and climate, even as test-score impacts may be mixed and accrue over time (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Goodman-Scott et al., 2019).

California Standards for the School Counseling Profession (2023)

California's standards align with ASCA while elevating Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), school-based mental health, equity, and data-informed decision-making across academic, postsecondary, and social-emotional domains; they also reflect statewide attention to counselor ratios and system capacity (California Association of School Counselors, 2023; Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2025).

California Education Code §49600

State policy and recent standards revisions reference and build on Education Code provisions addressing comprehensive educational counseling and pupil access to mental and behavioral health services, situating counseling within MTSS-aligned supports (California Association of School Counselors, 2023; California Education Code §49600, 2025).

LCFF/LCAP context

Within the Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control and Accountability Plan framework, districts like LUSD can target supplemental and concentration resources to comprehensive counseling and MTSS-aligned supports for high-need students; equity analyses emphasize pairing funding with clear guidance and cross-agency coordination to address out-of-school factors that shape opportunity, consistent with an ecological approach (Bishop & Noguera, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the Livingston Union School District offers a compelling case study of how strategic investments in comprehensive school counseling, guided by the ASCA framework and supported by LCFF/LCAP funding, can drive meaningful improvements in student outcomes. Through a mixed-methods approach, this brief explores LUSD's implementation strategies, stakeholder engagement, and the measurable impacts of its counseling program on key indicators, including chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, and school climate. By situating LUSD's experience within the broader research literature, this analysis aims to illuminate best practices and policy implications for other districts seeking to leverage school counseling as a central pillar of educational equity and excellence. As schools nationwide grapple with the complex needs of increasingly diverse student populations and growing gaps in academic, social, and emotional well-being and college and career readiness, LUSD's model provides a blueprint for harnessing the full potential of school counseling to advance equity, foster student well-being, and promote academic achievement for all.



Caption: Elizabeth Alvarez, a teacher, works with a student in her classroom, Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

Literature Review

Current studies emphasize the crucial role of school counselors in boosting student success and underscore the need for dedicated administrative support to facilitate robust, comprehensive programs within manageable caseloads, thereby maximizing their positive influence (American School Counselor Association, 2023; Sparks & Mulhern, 2024). The literature consistently link lower student-to-counselor ratios with improved graduation rates (Lapan et al., 2012), higher attendance (Goodman-Scott et al. 2018), reduced disciplinary incidents (Lapan et al., 2012), and greater postsecondary enrollment (Cholewa et al., 2015), particularly in schools serving high-need and economically disadvantaged populations (American School Counselor Association, 2023; Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Lapan et al. 2012). The ASCA recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 (American School Counselor Association, 2023; Parzych, Donohue, Gaesser, & Chiu, 2019); however, the national average remains above 400:1 (American School Counselor Association, 2023), with California's ratio at approximately 464:1, indicating a persistent gap in access to these critical supports (American School Counselor Association, 2023). California's Supplemental School Counseling Program, for example, has shown that targeted investments in counseling staff can yield measurable improvements in student achievement and well-being, including a roughly 3-percentage-point increase in graduation, a 1-percentage-point increase in public college enrollment, and school climate gains of about 0.1 SD, with the largest improvements in rural and high-poverty districts (Sparks & Mulhern, 2024).

Despite these promising findings, research also cautions that simply increasing the number of counselors is insufficient to guarantee improved student outcomes and program effectiveness; effects are modest and conditioned by context, including Title I status and whether counselors are diverted to non-counseling duties (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; American School Counselor Association, 2023). The effectiveness of school counseling programs depends on clear role delineation, adherence to comprehensive frameworks such as the ASCA model, and ongoing assessment of program fidelity and student outcomes (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; American School Counselor Association, 2019). Contextual factors—including socioeconomic status, community resources, and the quality of program implementation—further mediate the relationship between counseling services and student success (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2018).

Building on this evidence base, large-scale and multi-state evaluations show that organized, data-driven programs aligned with the ASCA National Model correlate with higher attendance, lower suspensions/discipline, and stronger achievement, with effects most pronounced in high-poverty



settings (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Lapan et al., 2012). In California, quasi-experimental evidence from the Supplemental School Counseling Program indicates that adding counselors and reducing caseloads by more than 150 students per counselor was followed by graduation and college-going increases and improved climate, with the largest gains in high-poverty and rural schools (Sparks & Mulhern, 2024). National analyses further confirm that ratios near ASCA's 250:1 benchmark are associated with higher GPAs and graduation, although the effects are modest and contingent upon Title I status—underscoring the need for staffing to be paired with program fidelity and role protection (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Parzych et al., 2019).

Livingston Union School District

Located along the 99 highway between Sacramento and Fresno, California, is the rural city of Livingston, situated in Merced County, California. Recognized for its small community and rich agricultural farmlands, Livingston is also home to the Livingston Union School District (LUSD). Livingston Union spans 80 square miles and serves approximately 2,500 students across four TK-8 schools: Campus Park Elementary, Selma Herndon Elementary, Yamato Colony Elementary (all serving grades TK through fifth), and Livingston Middle School (serving grades 6th through eighth). The district also provides early learning opportunities through preschool programs at the Walnut and Prusso Child Development Centers. Notably, LUSD's student body reflects the diversity that characterizes much of California's Central Valley; Livingston Union predominantly serves students from traditionally underserved backgrounds, with a student population that is approximately 83% Hispanic/Latine, 12% Asian, 3% white, and students from other racial and ethnic groups. Additionally, 43% of students are English learners, with over 50% qualifying for free or reduced-price meals (CDE, 2024).

Table 1. Student Demographic Data by School

	Total Count		FRPL-Eligible %		Latine %		Black/African American %		Native American %		Asian %		White %	
	2011-12	2018-19	2011-12	2018-19	2011-12	2018-19	2011-12	2018-19	2011-12	2018-19	2011-12	2018-19	2011-12	2018-19
Livingston Elementary Schools														
Campus Park Elementary	507	454	93.8%	91%	89.7%	90.7%	1.2%	0.9%	0.8%	0.7%	5.3%	4.4%	2.8%	3.1%
Selma Herdon Elementary	638	634	92.9%	81.2%	78.1%	78.1%	0%	0.6%	0.2%	1.1%	13%	14.7%	7.7%	3.3%
Yamato Colony Elementary	585	546	85.3%	85.3%	84.1%	83.3%	0.2%	0.5%	0.5%	0.7%	8.5%	9.5%	5%	4%
Other Merced County Elementary Schools														
Elim Elementary	882	999	54.6%	51.2%	34.6%	37.9%	0.5%	0.3%	0.7%	0.5%	0.8%	0.5%	62.1%	59.1%
Farmdale Elementary	872	887	93.2%	88.2%	61.9%	70.2%	4.4%	2.7%	0.3%	0.2%	23.7%	20%	7%	4.7%
Frank Sparkes Elementary	387	444	88.5%	94.8%	81.7%	85.8%	0.8%	0.5%	0%	0.7%	6.2%	4.5%	10.1%	8.6%
Merquin Elementary	159	128	86%	85.9%	68.6%	81.3%	1.3%	0%	0%	0%	1.3%	0%	28.3%	18%
Pioneer Elementary	925	1,054	85.7%	79.1%	62.7%	64.3%	7.6%	4.1%	0.3%	0.8%	11%	11.9%	16.1%	13.5%
Romero Elementary	274	245	89.2%	97.1%	86.1%	89.8%	0%	0%	0.7%	1.2%	1.8%	0.4%	10.9%	4.9%
Gustine Elementary	559	570	80%	79.1%	78.7%	84.2%	0.7%	0.4%	0%	0.2%	0.7%	0.2%	17.4%	12.8%
Sybil N. Crookham Elementary	420	410	90.6%	97.1%	87.9%	86.3%	0.2%	0.2%	0%	1.2%	2.9%	5.6%	9%	6.6%
Winfield Elementary	458	464	90.9%	92%	86.9%	84.5%	0.7%	1.5%	1.1%	0.4%	4.4%	6.7%	6.6%	6.5%

Note. This table presents a comparative analysis of student demographic data, disaggregating LUSD elementary school data from that of other elementary schools within Merced County. The disaggregation includes data by individual school, race/ethnicity, and eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). Data from the 2011-12 and 2018-19 school years are emphasized to align with the initial case study period in 2011/12 and to provide a pre-pandemic benchmark in 2018/19.

The emphasis on using school counseling models as a driver for educational equity is evident in the district's approach to serving a large population of English learners and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. It informs both resource allocation and instructional strategies (Livingston Unified School District, 2024). Staffing in LUSD is unique, as it features dedicated and diverse teams: caring and competent classroom teachers, proactive administrators, six full-time school counselors, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, an Early Education Specialist, and active parent liaisons across all school sites, working under the leadership of Superintendent Zamora, lead counselor Ms. Alma Lopez, and a supportive Board of Trustees. LUSD places a strong emphasis on fostering a positive school climate and maintaining safe, inclusive learning environments. This is reflected in parent and student survey data, which show that 86% of parents report that teachers have a high degree of respect for their children, and 80% feel that their children are safe at school (Livingston Union School District, 2021-22). In recent years, between 2018 and 2022, LUSD prioritized social-emotional learning and invested in restorative

practices, counseling, and health services, contributing to a 15% decline in suspension rates from 2018-2019 to 2021-2022 (Livingston Union School District, 2021-22), and proactive efforts to address chronic absenteeism through targeted family outreach and early intervention programs (Livingston Union School District, 2019-20). Ongoing investment in student support, wellness, and behavioral interventions, a holistic approach to student growth, is further reinforced by providing enrichment opportunities in the arts, music, and athletics, as well as robust after-school programs. LUSD's ongoing partnerships with community members emphasize meaningful engagement and ensure students and their families remain central to decision-making and programming. Sustained partnerships with families, combined with a strategic approach to ongoing engagement, further strengthen the district's ability to meet student needs. Collectively, these systems position Livingston Union School District as a leading example for small, diverse, and rural school districts aiming to build inclusive, equitable, and achievement-oriented learning communities.

Methods

This research brief employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the implementation and impact of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) initiatives, with a specific focus on the Livingston Union School District (LUSD) and its comprehensive school counseling program, which is modeled after the national ASCA model. The analysis draws on a case study originally conducted in 2018, integrating newly collected qualitative and quantitative data to update and deepen the understanding of district practices and outcomes. The study is grounded in a multiple case study design, originally encompassing five California school districts that successfully leveraged LCFF to advance educational equity. LUSD was selected in particular for its designation as a “Bright Spot” district, recognized for its success in improving student outcomes despite serving a high-need, predominantly Latine, and socioeconomically disadvantaged population. The selection of an exemplar case enhances the study’s validity by allowing for an in-depth analysis of promising practices, providing a potential blueprint for other districts facing similar equity challenges. For this brief, emphasis is placed on a secondary data analysis of LUSD, combining retrospective findings with current mixed-methods data collection. This approach enables a comprehensive assessment of both the district’s evolving strategies and their sustained effects on student outcomes, particularly as they relate to instructional models, school climate, English learner support, early learning programs, and community engagement.



Data Sources

- 1. California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS):** The CHKS provides quantitative and qualitative data on school climate, student engagement, and perceptions of safety and belonging. These data are essential for assessing the broader context in which the counseling program operates and for understanding changes in school climate over time.
- 2. Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) documents and reports:** LCAPs and related budget documents offer detailed information on district priorities, planned actions, expenditures, and progress toward goals. These documents are crucial for tracking how LCFF funds are allocated, particularly for high-need student groups such as English learners, foster youth, and low-income students (Livingston Union School District, 2024).
- 3. Interview transcripts with district leadership and counselors:** Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including district administrators, school counselors, and other educational leaders, between 2019 and 2022. These interviews provide rich, narrative data on the decision-making processes, implementation challenges, and perceived impacts of the counseling program (LUSD_KS, 2022; LUSD_AZ, 2022).
- 4. Quantitative analysis of suspension rates:** Using publicly available California Department of Education data, we analyzed changes in LUSD’s K–5 suspension rates from 2011–12 (pre-LCFF) to 2018–19 (pre-pandemic) and benchmarked them against demographically comparable K–5 schools within Merced County, with comparability defined along dimensions such as student racial and ethnic composition, chronic absenteeism rates, socioeconomic status (e.g., FRPL eligibility), and percentage of English learners to contextualize LUSD’s outcomes.
- 5. Document analysis:** Additional documents, such as strategic plans and program evaluations, were reviewed to supplement and corroborate findings from other data sources.

Data Collection and Analysis

- Document review:** Researchers systematically collected and reviewed LCAPs, budget reports, and program evaluations from LUSD and comparison districts. This process included extracting relevant metrics, actions, and expenditure data related to counseling and student support services.

- **Semi-structured interviews:** Interviews were conducted with district and site-level leaders, students, counselors, and other stakeholders. Interview protocols were designed to elicit detailed accounts of LCFF implementation, stakeholder engagement, and the evolution of the counseling program. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized for analysis.
- **Statistical and survey data:** Suspension and enrollment data were drawn from the California Department of Education's public databases, with analyses restricted to K–5 schools to control for grade-level differences in suspension patterns. We computed mean suspension rates for LUSD from 2011–12 (pre-LCFF) through 2018–19 (pre-pandemic) and established two comparison groups: all other K–5 schools in Merced County and a subset of demographically similar K–5 schools. To contextualize these administrative trends, we incorporated California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) data on school climate and student perceptions to supplement and triangulate findings with interview data.
- **Thematic and narrative analysis:** Interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns related to LCFF implementation, stakeholder engagement, and the perceived impact of counseling services. Narrative analysis was used to construct case descriptions that highlight stakeholders' lived experiences and the counseling program's evolution.
- **Document analysis:** LCAPs and related documents were analyzed to trace the alignment between district goals, resource allocation, and reported outcomes. Special attention was given to actions and expenditures targeting high-need students, as well as to the mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and accountability.
- **Triangulation:** We triangulated findings by comparing the quantitative trend of decreasing suspension rates in the CDE administrative data with qualitative accounts from teachers and staff, who described fewer behavioral referrals to the office (interview data), and with CHKS-reported student perceptions of safety. Convergent evidence across these sources strengthened inferences about changing school climate and discipline patterns over time.



FINDINGS

The Impact of School Counseling: Evidence from LUSD and Beyond



An analysis of interviews with counselors, teachers, administrators, and parents reveals a shared recognition of the critical role school counseling plays in supporting student mental health, academic achievement, and equity. In a subsequent interview with Livingston’s lead counselor, Ms. Alma Lopez, and Superintendent Andrés Zamora, they discussed the success of their counseling program across LUSD, highlighting their ability to cultivate a culture of collaboration among counselors, students, and parents, as well as their commitment to refining the model to address evolving student needs. The necessity of school counselors was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the LUSD 2024–2027 LCAP, Livingston has consistently reported lower chronic absenteeism rates than the state average, both

prior to the pandemic and again in 2023 (Livingston Unified School District, 2024). The district attributes this to monthly check-ins with site administrators, close tracking of student attendance, and a strong investment in personalized student support, including trauma-informed care, access to mental health specialists, and conflict resolution services. Overall, Livingston Union’s stakeholders consistently identified collaborative approaches, data-driven initiatives, and the ongoing need to refine the ASCA counseling framework. Since the implementation of the ASCA framework, Livingston Union has demonstrated positive changes from its comprehensive school counseling program. The most notable trends are seen in their chronic absenteeism rates, suspension rates, and school climate.

Table 2. Livingston Union School District Student Enrollment Data by Race & Ethnicity

	Enrollment									
						Student Racial & Ethnic Make-up (%)				
	Total (N)	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students (%)	English Learners (%)	Foster Youth (%)	Homeless Youth (%)	Latine	Black/ African American	Native American	Asian	White
2019	2,464	85.10%	49.00%	0.10%	4.70%	84.30%	0.60%	0.70%	9.70%	3.40%
2020	2,494	84.40%	44.10%	0.40%	4.60%	83.00%	0.80%	0.70%	10.80%	3.40%
2021	2,474	84.70%	45.40%	0.20%	3.80%	82.30%	0.70%	0.70%	11.70%	3.00%
2022	2,490	77.80%	46.40%	0.30%	5.20%	82.40%	0.60%	0.60%	11.80%	2.90%
2023	2,504	78.30%	42.70%	0.00%	4.60%	83.10%	0.70%	0.40%	11.70%	2.70%
2024	2,545	79.10%	39.60%	0.20%	5.40%	82.60%	0.50%	0.30%	12.50%	2.90%

Note. The table presents student enrollment and demographic trends in the district from 2019 to 2024, highlighting changes in the racial and ethnic makeup, socioeconomic status, English language learner (ELL) proportion, and the number of foster youth and homeless youth. The data reveal a predominantly Latine student body, consistently making up over 82% of the total student population, with only minor year-to-year fluctuations. White students constituted the next largest group, gradually increasing from 9.7% in 2019 to 12.5% in 2024, while the proportions of Black/African American, Native American, and Asian students remained small and relatively stable, each consistently under 1% and 13% respectively. Socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students comprised a significant portion of the population—over 84% through 2021—before decreasing to approximately 78% in 2022 and then stabilizing at around 78%–79% in recent years. This data suggests a slight decrease in economic disadvantage after the pandemic, followed by a plateau. The proportion of ELL students has steadily decreased from nearly half the student body (49% in 2019) to under 40% (39.6% in 2024), indicating noticeable shifts in language needs across the years. Foster youth have remained a very small fraction of the student population, generally below 0.5%, with minor variations from year to year. The percentages of homeless youth ranged from 3.8% to 5.4% over the period, fluctuating within a narrow band and showing no discernible long-term trend. Overall student enrollment gradually rose from 2,464 in 2019 to 2,545 in 2024, showing modest growth and resilience in the face of broader disruptions. Collectively, these data reflect a district characterized by demographic stability in most subgroups, with persistent challenges related to socioeconomic disadvantage and a high representation of English language learners, yet with declining ELL rates in recent years.

KEY FINDING 1

Chronic absenteeism rates show a post-pandemic surge, followed by substantial improvement.



Caption: A school staff member works with students at Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

Livingston Union School District (LUSD) has experienced notable fluctuations in chronic absenteeism rates over recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, the district reported a chronic absenteeism rate of 4.9%, which rose sharply to 17.9% in 2022 and peaked at 18.3% in 2023 (CDE, 2023). By Spring 2024, the rate had declined to 14.2%, reflecting a positive trend, although it remained above pre-pandemic levels. Notably, certain student groups—including Asian, English learners, Latine, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities—were disproportionately impacted. Several subgroups at specific school sites, such as Selma Herndon Elementary and Campus Park Elementary, received the lowest performance indicators for chronic absenteeism on the California School Dashboard (CDE, 2024). The district has established a target of reducing chronic absenteeism to 3% by the end of the 2023–24 academic year, with an emphasis on implementing targeted interventions for the most affected student populations. LUSD’s designation as a “Bright Spot” district by the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, AttendanceWorks, and UC Davis highlights its relative success in sustaining lower absenteeism rates compared to statewide averages, despite persistent socio-economic challenges (Livingston Union School District, 2024; 2021–22).

LUSD addresses chronic absenteeism through collaborative and data-informed practices, routinely analyzing both social-emotional learning outcomes and attendance data to refine interventions and support students more effectively. According to a counselor within LUSD:

“We usually start with the pre-test so we can know what the students know about the social-emotional aspect. And then I’ll print in each of the lessons that we did a post-test, so like, can it help us now understand, ‘okay, so what are the students learning from what we taught them? Or what is something that we can adjust so we can improve in that area?’ As well as looking at, like, a focus of attendance. And the focus of behavior, how many office referrals do we have? That for attendance, like our student, how many students have chronic absences and how else we can support them in that area.”

—LIVINGSTON USD COUNSELOR

Table 3. Livingston Union School District Chronic Absenteeism Rates

Year	Chronic Absenteeism Rates (%)	
	Chronically Absent	Change
2019	4.90%	(-) 1.3%
2020	N/A	N/A
2021	N/A	N/A
2022	17.90%	N/A
2023	18.30%	(+) 0.9%
2024	14.20%	(-) 4.6%

Note. The table displays trends in key student indicators from 2019 to 2024, with a focus on chronic absenteeism rates due to their sensitivity to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which followed the initial case study period. Chronic absenteeism increased following the COVID-19 pandemic but has since declined significantly. Enrollment showed only slight growth during this period and was not notably affected by the pandemic. The percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students decreased slightly before plateauing, while student homelessness rates remained stable within a narrow 0.5%–1% range.

KEY FINDING 2

Suspension rates decreased following targeted district interventions.



Caption: Livingston Middle School library, Livingston, CA.

Livingston Union School District (LUSD) has demonstrated significant progress in reducing suspension rates, particularly when compared to similar districts. The district's suspension rate was 1.9% in 2019, increased to 3.4% in 2022, and then declined slightly to 2.8% in 2023 (CDE, 2023; Livingston Union District, 2024). For context, California's state-wide suspension averages are publicly reported on the California School Dashboard: 3.4% in 2019, 3.1% in 2022, and 3.5% in 2023, consistent with LCFF/LCAP reporting requirements on student suspensions (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; CDE, 2023). This reduction is especially noteworthy given that, between 2011–12 and 2018–19, the mean suspension rate for students with disabilities in Livingston schools decreased by 5.5 percentage points, while comparable schools across Merced County experienced an increase of 1 percentage point (CDE, 2024). Disaggregated data further indicate that the mean suspension rate for Latine students in Livingston schools declined by 1.2%, whereas similar schools in Merced County reported increases over the same period. These improvements are largely attributed to the district's strategic implementation of student support systems, alternatives to suspension, and restorative practices, particularly at the middle school level, which have fostered a more positive school climate and led to fewer behavioral referrals. An LUSD instructional resource teacher further illustrates this:

"There has been, like I mentioned, a decrease in students' [mis]behavior. We don't have as many students in the office anymore, as we used to before. I remember the first year when I started, we used to have a lot of students in the office during recess time, now that's not the case. They go to the office because they fell and they need ice for a health issue, not for a behavior issue. And so that has decreased a lot. So just that positive turn, the positive community that we have, that we have started to build in this school has made a big change from what I have been able to see. So yes, it has improved."

-LIVINGSTON USD INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE TEACHER

Table 3. Livingston Union School District Suspension Rates

Year	Suspension Rate(s) (%)	
	Suspended	Change
2019	1.9% at least once	0.20%
2020	N/A	N/A
2021	N/A	N/A
2022	3.4% once per day	N/A
2023	2.8% once per day	0.60%
2024	2.8% once per day	0%

Note. The table displays trends in key student indicators from 2019 to 2024, focusing on suspension rates due to their sensitivity to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which followed the initial case study period. Suspension rates rose by over 2% after 2020 and have remained steady at 2.8% for the past two years. Enrollment trends showed minimal growth with no major pandemic-related impacts. Both SED percentages and homelessness rates remained relatively stable, with SED students plateauing after an initial decline, and homelessness fluctuating by only 0.5%–1%.



Caption: An educator teaching in a classroom, Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

KEY FINDING 3 **Patterns of student belonging, safety, and well-being are generally positive and improving.**

School climate metrics, as measured by the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) and the LCAP Student Survey, present a more nuanced picture of students' sense of belonging, perceived safety, and overall well-being within Livingston Union School District. In 2020, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 88.9% of students reported feeling safe at school. However, this percentage declined to 76.1% in 2022 and further to 74% in 2023, reflecting the impact of COVID-19 pandemic-related disruptions. In the post-pandemic period, perceptions of student safety have shown improvement, supported by the district's efforts to expand staff professional development and strengthen family engagement initiatives (LCAP, 2024). According to the 2024-2027 LCAP Student Survey, 72% of students in grades 3 through 8 reported feeling safe at school, while 89% indicated a sense of belonging. Staff and parent survey responses also highlighted opportunities for continued growth. For example, only 44% of staff strongly agreed that the school is a safe environment for students, and 42% strongly agreed that the school is welcoming and actively facilitates parent involvement (Livingston Union School District, 2021-22). These findings suggest that while meaningful progress has been made, additional efforts are necessary to strengthen perceptions of safety, inclusion, and engagement, particularly in the wake of COVID-19 challenges.

Student Sense of Belonging: Patterns of Connection and Inclusion



Across both the 2019-2020 and 2021-22 periods, students in Livingston Union reported generally positive, though nuanced, experiences of belonging and connectedness at school. In 2019-2020, 69% of fifth graders reported strong school connectedness, while related measures, such as relationships with caring adults (73%) and perceptions of high expectations from adults (84%), supported a positive sense of belonging. Notably, girls reported higher connectedness than boys (73% vs. 64%), a trend that persisted in 2021-22, with connectedness remaining consistent at 68% overall, at 74% for girls and 62% for boys. Analyses disaggregated by race/ethnicity reveal further disparities; students identifying as "Other" experienced less belonging and respect (56%) compared to their Asian, Latine, and white peers (low-to-mid 80% range). While most students felt respected and reported consistent parent involvement (78%), fewer indicated having meaningful opportunities for participation in decision-making at school (41-46%). These results underscore both strengths in adult-student relationships and areas for improvement, especially in fostering inclusion and voice for all demographic groups.

Student Safety: Shifting Perceptions and Persistent Challenges



Livingston Union's CHKS survey data showed that most students felt safe at school, although levels declined after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; notable disparities were observed by gender and subgroup. In 2019–2020, 75% of fifth graders reported feeling safe at school most or all of the time, and 77% felt safe during their commute to school. In 2021–22, those numbers dropped modestly to 70% and 82%, respectively, with a new gender gap: 75% of females felt safe, compared with 64% of males. Reports of witnessing weapons on campus fell slightly from 15% to 13%, and physical aggression decreased from 45% to 20%. Still, bullying remained a concern, with the anti-bullying climate reported at 71% in 2021–22, and 22% of students experiencing cyberbullying. Students identifying as "Other" for race/ethnicity, as well as males, consistently felt less safe and faced more negative peer interactions. Although most students agreed that adults opposed bullying and would intervene, fewer believed that peers would step in to help—a gap that points to the need for further social support and clear disciplinary policies to reinforce a strong safety culture.

Student Well-Being: Resilience, Mental Health, and Overall Health



Findings from the CHKS indicate that student well-being in Livingston Union is generally strong, although persistent differences exist across gender and racial/ethnic disparities, as well as challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019–2020, 84% of students demonstrated high academic motivation and 82% felt well-supported in social-emotional learning (SEL), while only 23% reported frequent sadness (Livingston Union School District, 2019–20).

These indicators remained stable in 2021–2022, with academic motivation at 79% and social-emotional supports at 76% (Livingston Union School District, 2021–22). Other composite wellness metrics, such as healthy habits (e.g., breakfast, sleep), also varied, with girls reporting healthier routines. Moreover, girls consistently reported higher scores than boys across most well-being measures (i.e., Academic motivation, SEL supports, Healthy routines). However, persistent sadness affected 21% to 22% of students, with the highest rates among those racially/ethnically identifying as "Other" (39%) and among Latine students (22%). Substance use remained low, with 6% and 11% of students reporting alcohol or drug use, and almost no students reporting vaping during either survey period. Although these survey outcomes highlight a strong overall prioritization of student well-being, the persistence of mental health and wellness disparities—especially in the post-pandemic period—signals the ongoing need for targeted, equitable interventions to ensure all student groups are adequately supported.



Caption: Graduation gowns and college banners hang on a wall in Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

KEY FINDING 4

Collaborative decision-making guided by data-driven approaches is central to LUSD.

Livingston Union School District (LUSD) has established institutionalized collaborative and data-driven structures to comprehensively address student needs. Leadership prioritizes consistent, system-wide frameworks for teacher collaboration and counseling services, ensuring that every school, while adapting these practices to local needs, upholds collaboration as a foundational element (Livingston Union School District, 2024). As Superintendent Zamora explained,

“A system structure for us is collaboration. We need to ensure that ... there's a structure for teacher collaboration. Another one would be counseling, social, to address the social-emotional needs of our students. So when that's a system structure, it's something that we strive to say that every school has. It may look a little different based on the unique needs of the school, but it's something that, as a system, we're saying, 'No, this is a priority.'”

-ANDRÉS ZAMORA, SUPERINTENDENT, LIVINGSTON USD

These collaborative practices have become even more significant following the COVID-19 pandemic, with shifts in curriculum and targeted interventions. Ms. Alma Lopez, Lead Counselor, described,

“If the teachers are taking this weekly instruction, then where can we enhance and what can we improve and do differently? And there's been a number of things, but most recently we were able to lean in a little bit more to another kind of space to look at the kids who had greater need, and what could we do and how can we best support [them], which has been providing a more intentional evidence-based curriculum to the students that we're pulling out of the class to do an intentional intervention, whether it's [a] small group or one-on-one, and then getting additional information into the hands of our teachers who are working with the kids every day. ”

-ALMA LOPEZ, LEAD COUNSELOR, LIVINGSTON USD

A history teacher at Livingston Middle School describes how teachers, counselors, and administrators use student feedback to refine counselor-led instruction and inform future curriculum, workshops, and lesson planning aimed at strengthening student support:

“We, the History department, met [with] the counselors and [we discussed], 'What's working? What is the feedback from us [as teachers]? [What is] The feedback from students? What can we do to improve? What are the kids saying?' We were given the feedback, I had my kids take a survey, I gave the feedback to the counselors, and the counselors took the feedback to the administrators. So they (the counselors) are communicating with the administrators [about] what's going on. They do go to the classes and they have a specific theme; they are going to come to my class next week to talk about college, I believe. They also have at least one meeting per trimester to talk to students who need additional support, how can we provide them support? [If] there's a plan, what do we have to do to meet the plan? They also have one meeting a trimester with students, staff, and parents, [The] School Advisory Program. I'm probably missing more, but they have activities during lunchtime and they always have staff to participate so that way we can incorporate some of the lessons.”

-MIDDLE SCHOOL HISTORY TEACHER, LIVINGSTON USD



Caption: Lead Counselor Alma Lopez looks at college banners on a wall, Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

Another teacher at the middle school further illustrates this collaboration by describing counselor-led workshops and student clubs that promote social-emotional learning and a supportive school environment after students returned to school following the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic:

“Sometimes the counselors will also do workshops. I think each year, the past several years, they’ve done a suicide prevention workshop with the staff and they’ll give us resources and things to look out for in the classroom. They also do some clubs with the students ... the B.I.O.N.I.C. Club, which is Believe It Or Not I Care. And they have students do all different types of activities, new student lunches, other activities to help students feel welcome. And then, when [the counselors] come into our classrooms, they do [a] little pre-test over usually whatever the theme is. If it’s on empathy, they’ll ask at the beginning, ‘What is empathy to you?’ And so the students can type in their answer. And then after they’ve done the lesson, they’ll ask the same question again, ‘What is it to you?’ Checking to see what they’ve learned during the lesson.”

-MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER, LIVINGSTON USD

The ongoing collaboration at Livingston Union School District (LUSD) facilitates the implementation of actionable data and professional development opportunities to staff and families, driving continuous improvement in both academic and social-emotional domains (Livingston Union School District, 2024). This approach has become especially significant since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting shifts in curriculum, instructional delivery, and support systems. As described by LUSD staff, coordinated efforts between teachers and counselors enable targeted, evidence-based interventions, such as small-group and one-on-one support for students with higher needs, while also ensuring regular, responsive instruction. The direct input from counseling stakeholders reflects LUSD’s commitment to equity and responsiveness through intentional, system-wide collaboration, ultimately ensuring that diverse student needs are consistently and equitably addressed (Livingston Union School District, 2024; A. Lopez, personal communication, March 2024).



Caption: Students in classroom, Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

KEY FINDING 5

The ASCA comprehensive model informs implementation of student support systems across the district, not just school counseling strategies.



Caption: Lead Counselor Alma Lopez's office door, Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

Livingston Union School District's (LUSD) comprehensive counseling strategy stands out as a model of sustainability, adaptability, and equity focus, deeply informed by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2023; Livingston Union School District, 2024). Central to this success is LUSD's system-wide commitment to clear roles and purposeful collaboration—an approach strongly emphasized by counseling staff. Lead Counselor Ms. Alma Lopez describes this philosophy:

"As we've grown in Livingston, one of our spaces that we hope to enhance is really looking at all of us as providers, right? We all play a certain role and [understand] each other's roles and how we complement each other and how sometimes it's important to kind of stay in this lane, but then other times it's important to know how to merge nicely with one another because all of the students in Livingston are all of our students, right? And all of the students in California are all of our students, right? And so I think helping teams understand that within our local community, but then [also within] that bigger community."

-ALMA LOPEZ, LEAD COUNSELOR, LIVINGSTON USD

This perspective creates a culture where student support responsibilities are shared by all adults in the learning community, reinforcing a holistic and collective approach to meeting students' needs. LUSD's adaptability was especially evident during the shift to virtual instruction in the COVID-19 pandemic. District leaders report that counselors proactively engaged students online, creating virtual forums and innovative supports to sustain student well-being and engagement. Superintendent Zamora highlights this proactive adaptation:

"I think the model has been very adaptive, and by that, I mean I remember we went to online learning, which was horrible, but our counselors didn't sit back. They were working with kids online. They were creating virtual forums for kids. Com[ing] out of COVID, we're seeing new dynamics with behaviors and adjustments to learning; adjustments to school. To this day, we live some of that, and our counselors are taking the lead on how we support learning and are being very influential in how that affects classrooms."

-ANDRÉS ZAMORA, SUPERINTENDENT, LIVINGSTON USD

An instructional resource teacher highlights how the school counselor took initiative to create virtual spaces for students to engage with their peers beyond an academic environment amidst the difficulties of virtual learning:

"During the pandemic, [the counselor] was extremely active; very, very active. She created that Google page and in that Google page, which was very accessible to parents, to students, to teachers, to everybody at our school site, she had group sessions going on for the students that had been referred. She had one-on-one sessions for students. They could go into her Google page and say, 'I need to speak,' and she would make herself available and she would set up a meeting with them virtually. She had, I believe it was Fun Wednesdays or Thursdays where students could jump in there during their recess or during their lunch break time; they would go in there and talk to each other. She had virtual activities during that time as well. She had blocks that were set up for grade levels to meet and then she also had blocks that were for whoever wanted to meet. Second graders could see some

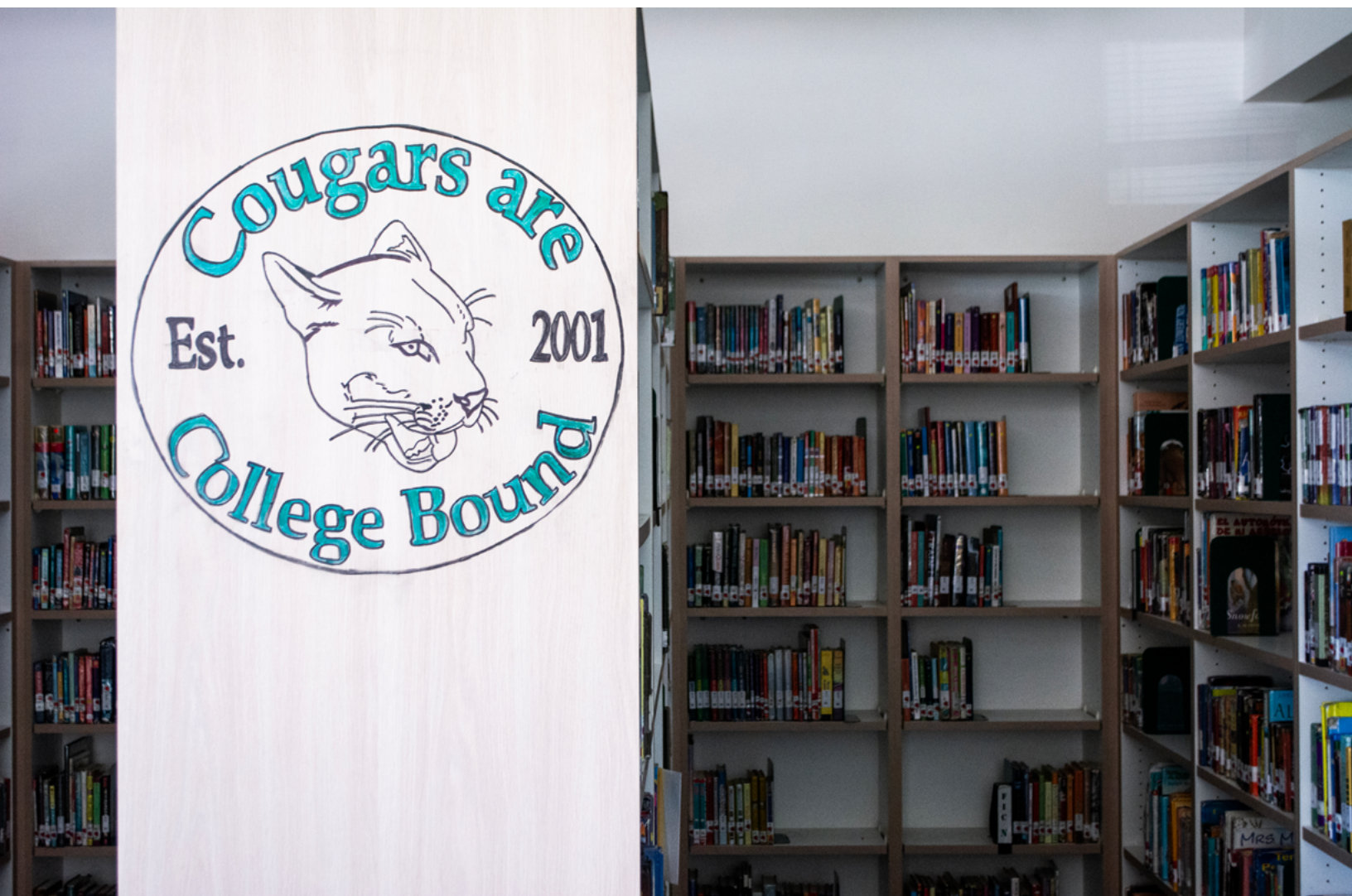
of their grade buddies as well or likewise, grade-level spans. So she was very active during that time. And she was very accessible to the students one-on-one, to the students at the group level, and to the parents, and including to us, to the staff. So we really appreciated that support that she provided us during that time.”

-INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE TEACHER, LIVINGSTON USD

Such flexibility aligns with ASCA guidance on responsive and data-driven adaptation, ensuring the counseling model remains attuned to evolving school environments and student dynamics (ASCA, 2023). Furthermore, LUSD maintains a strong equity orientation, seeking to strategically enhance services for students with specialized needs, including foster youth, English learners, and migrant students. Superintendent Zamora articulates this vision for continual expansion:

“Where could it go in the future? I think, continue to adapt it and look for opportunities that we can expand services to be maybe even more strategic because while we have general needs, we still have greater needs like foster youth, newcomers, English learners, youth that have very unique needs that really could warrant having people focus just directly on that. And I think Ms. Alma could play a key role in helping build that in the future.”

-ANDRÉS ZAMORA, SUPERINTENDENT, LIVINGSTON USD



Caption: Livingston Middle School library, Livingston, CA.



Caption: Lead Counselor Alma Lopez meets with a student in her office, Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

In support of Superintendent Andrés Zamora's insights regarding the future of LUSD's counseling program, Lead Counselor Ms. Alma Lopez attributes their success to the district's dedication to research-based practices and consistent implementation of the ASCA National Model. The ASCA model serves as a guide, ensuring counselors focus on their core responsibilities and are not diverted by administrative tasks.

“A big part of our program, the sustainability, I feel, has been that we've anchored our model to a research-based approach. And I feel that helps us maintain fidelity to a practice, a school counseling practice, so that our school counselors do what they're hired to do and they aren't doing other stuff because there's another person available. And in a smaller school system, sometimes we need all the bodies we have available to help, but that has definitely been a key piece for us to stay focused on that model.”

-ALMA LOPEZ, LEAD COUNSELOR, LIVINGSTON USD

An SEL teacher commends the counseling program for its effectiveness and sustainability compared to those in neighboring districts, noting that ongoing improvements are always encouraged to support students' academic and personal well-being:

“I am very impressed with everything that they have on their caseload because it's not just emotional management, it's academics and they make themselves so present ...So it does make a big difference, I believe. And I see that our students are happier, that they're learning to interact with one another in a more positive way. And I do like that it starts with TK Kinder, it starts from there and we keep moving forward. It's not perfect. I don't think anything is perfect but I do see a difference from this district to others where I've worked in other positions and I think we're very fortunate.”

-SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING TEACHER, LIVINGSTON USD

This research-driven approach helps counselors stay focused on their primary mission, providing consistent, high-impact student support even as roles and needs evolve (ASCA, 2023; LUSD, 2024–2027). In summary, interviews with the LUSD counseling staff illustrate how collaborative practice, adaptive responsiveness, and a dedication to equity and research-based implementation sustain the ASCA Model's impact and keep student well-being at the heart of district operations.

Recommendations

Drawing on the findings from the Livingston Union School District (LUSD) case study and the broader research literature, it is evident that comprehensive, equity-driven school counseling programs—when implemented with fidelity and supported by targeted funding—can yield improvements in student outcomes, particularly for high-need populations. To further advance the impact of such programs, the following recommendations are proposed for policy and practice in California:

RECOMMENDATION 1 **Prioritize sustained funding for comprehensive counseling programs statewide.**

Policymakers and district leaders should prioritize sustained and, where possible, expanded investment in comprehensive school counseling programs that adhere to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model. The LUSD experience demonstrates that targeted funding through mechanisms such as the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) enables districts to lower student-to-counselor ratios to a recommended 250:1 proportion, implement evidence-based interventions, and address the multifaceted needs of diverse student populations (ASCA, 2019; Sparks & Mulhern, 2024). Research consistently links lower counselor caseloads with improved graduation rates, reduced disciplinary incidents, and enhanced student well-being, especially in high-poverty and rural contexts (ASCA, 2023a; Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Lapan et al., 2012). However, as the literature cautions, simply increasing the number of counselors is insufficient; investments must be coupled with clear role delineation, ongoing professional development, and rigorous program evaluation to ensure fidelity to comprehensive frameworks (Akos et al., 2018; Cholewa et al., 2015; Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2025). Therefore, state and local policies should incentivize not only the hiring of additional counselors but also the implementation of robust, data-driven counseling models that are responsive to local needs and continuously assessed for effectiveness.



Caption: Students in classroom, Livingston Middle School, Livingston, CA.

RECOMMENDATION 2 **Establish and strengthen school counselor role clarity and collaborative structures.**

Effective school counseling requires that counselors are empowered to focus on their core professional responsibilities—namely, the delivery of direct and indirect services to students as outlined in the ASCA model, as well as the California Standards for the School Counseling Profession continuum of practice—rather than being diverted to administrative or non-counseling tasks (ASCA, 2019, 2023a, 2023b; Lapan, 2018). The LUSD case study emphasizes the significance of role clarity, collaborative leadership, and structured opportunities for counselors, teachers, and administrators to collaborate in addressing student needs. For instance, LUSD’s emphasis on regular collaboration, shared professional development, and intentional engagement with families has contributed to measurable improvements in school climate, attendance, and behavioral outcomes. To replicate these successes, districts should establish clear policies that delineate counselor roles, protect time for direct student services, and foster interdisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, ongoing training and stakeholder engagement should be implemented to ensure that all staff understand the unique contributions of school counselors and are equipped to support a holistic, equity-focused approach to student support (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2018). A few actionable recommendations include:



Prioritizing role clarity and accountability

Adopt state standards (e.g. California State Standards for the School Counseling profession) and require annual administrative conferences to define appropriate counselor duties, set annual, measurable student outcome goals, and agree on calendars and use-of-time expectations that protect direct services; use ASCA Model tools (Annual Administrative Conference, Annual Student Outcome Goals, Use of Time, and Calendars) to document and monitor implementation.



Protect counselor time

Reassign non-counseling duties, such as scheduling, record-keeping, and administrative tasks, to non-counseling personnel. Track counselor use of time and ensure that at least 80% is spent on direct/indirect services with students, consistent with ASCA guidance and time-use evidence.



Build collaborative ecosystems

Formalize consultation and coordination routines with teachers, families, and community partners (including county mental health) for referrals, case management, and continuity of care, as outlined in the California Standards’ emphasis on indirect services and school-based mental health.





RECOMMENDATION 3

Implement **data-driven counseling models** responsive to school & community needs.

State and local policies should incentivize the implementation of robust, data-driven counseling models that are responsive to local needs and continuously assessed for effectiveness (ASCA, 2023a; Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012). LUSD uses collaborative and data-informed practices, routinely analyzing social-emotional learning outcomes and attendance data to refine interventions and support students more effectively. Data should be used to identify student needs, remove barriers to success, and promote equitable access and school-wide achievement (ASCA 2023a, 2023b; Sparks & Mulhern, 2024). Concretely:



Require MTSS-aligned universal screening

at least two times per year, with progress monitoring and data reviews that inform Tier 1 classroom lessons, Tier 2 groups, and Tier 3 individualized supports, consistent with California's standards and Education Code 49600's MTSS intent.



Mandate disaggregated equity-gap analysis and public reporting

(by subgroup) each semester, along with action plans and results-sharing, an area that administrators report is often under-implemented.



Mandate use of validated, evidence-based assessment tools and universal screeners

for social-emotional/behavioral risk, attendance risk, and academic warning (e.g., standardized SEL screeners; suicide/threat/risk assessments), with protocols for referral, follow-up, and case management within MTSS tiers.



Align LCAP metrics and dashboards to counseling outcomes

(attendance, suspensions, climate, graduation, college-going) and require county-office oversight to verify use of evidence-based practices in high-need schools, consistent with LCFF's equity intent.

RECOMMENDATION 4 **Promote adaptability and equity-focused practices within counseling programs.**

School counseling programs should be adaptive and flexible to meet the evolving needs of students, as demonstrated by LUSD's response during the COVID-19 pandemic. LUSD proactively engaged students online, creating virtual forums and innovative supports to sustain student well-being and engagement. Counseling programs should also maintain a strong equity orientation, strategically enhancing services for students with specialized needs, including foster youth, English learners, and migrant students. This includes fostering inclusion and voice for all demographic groups:



Develop a hybrid counseling delivery model that endures beyond emergencies

by providing multimodal access (in-person, virtual office hours, tele-counseling, and text/email check-ins), and publish service continuity plans for potential disruptions. These plans will align virtual small groups, classroom lessons, and family workshops with MTSS tiers.



Elevate family partnership and access

through multilingual, flexible scheduling (evenings/weekends/virtual) for SEL, attendance, and college/career programming, with interpreters and recorded sessions available for later viewing, and train staff to recognize mental-health warning signs and referral pathways.



Embed student voice and inclusion

by establishing a Student Counseling Advisory Council that reflects school demographics—including foster, EL, and migrant student representation—to co-design SEL lessons, climate strategies, and feedback loops, and conduct biannual climate and belonging scans to adjust Tier 1 practices.

RECOMMENDATION 5 **Establish formal state mechanisms for scaling up promising student-centered strategies.**

Briefs and case studies like this underscore the importance of documenting promising practices and strategies that have been shown to improve student learning and school climate outcomes. The state lacks established mechanisms, such as a clearinghouse, for sharing transformative work at scale. State agencies, such as the California Department of Education and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), should play a more critical role as a central clearinghouse to systematically identify, curate, and share district bright spots. This brief also highlights the potential return on investment of the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), as noted in other studies (Johnson, 2023). LCFF distributes roughly \$4 out of every \$5 that K–12 schools receive from the state budget and local property tax revenue (Kaplan, 2025).

Conclusion

This research brief presents an analysis of the transformative potential of comprehensive, equity-focused school counseling programs, utilizing the compelling case study of the Livingston Union School District (LUSD) to illustrate key principles and strategies. Through strategic resource allocation and collaborative leadership, guided by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model and sustained through targeted funding, LUSD has demonstrably improved critical student outcomes. These improvements include significant reductions in suspension rates and chronic absenteeism, alongside the cultivation of a more positive school climate, even amidst the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These gains underscore the crucial importance of maintaining low student-to-counselor ratios, ensuring clear roles for counseling staff, and implementing data-driven interventions responsive to the needs of historically underserved students. This brief documents a replicable model for other districts seeking to strengthen their student support infrastructures. LUSD's adaptive strategies, commitment to program fidelity, and sustained stakeholder engagement offer invaluable lessons for educational leaders. The evidence reinforces that effective school counseling is a foundational pillar for advancing educational equity and promoting holistic student well-being. As educational communities grapple with opportunity gaps and the complex needs of a diverse student body, they also face a pressing national student mental health crisis. LUSD's proactive and holistic model provides a clear roadmap for addressing this challenge, proving that comprehensive school counseling is not a luxury but an essential component of the educational infrastructure required to foster student well-being and advance academic opportunity in the 21st century. This research serves as a call to action for all educational stakeholders to prioritize and strategically implement comprehensive school counseling programs to foster equitable, supportive, and empowering learning environments where all students can thrive.



Caption: A mural in Livingston, CA.

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