

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND WELL-BEING IN CALIFORNIA 2019–21

Key Findings from the Eighteenth Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey

The Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey (Biennial CHKS) assesses school climate and student supports, engagement, and well-being. It is conducted over a two-year period among a representative state sample of students in grades 7, 9, and 11.

Over **39,000 students** from **120 public schools** participated in the 2019–21 survey.

PANDEMIC-RELATED SURVEY CHALLENGES

The administration of this Biennial CHKS faced unique challenges created by the COVID-19 outbreak and resulting pandemic.



Survey administration halted in mid-March 2020 when the vast majority of California schools ended in-person instruction.



**2019-20
ACADEMIC YEAR**

**2020-21
ACADEMIC YEAR**



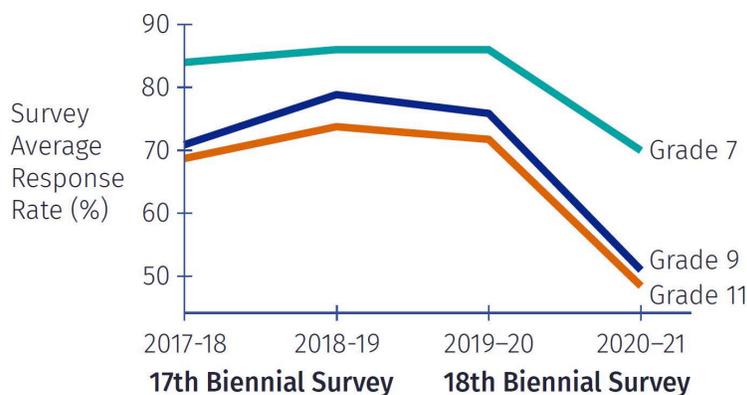
As school buildings remained closed, between two-thirds and three-fourths of students **took the survey in their homes** rather than in classroom settings.

Some **survey items were added** to capture insights relevant to remote learning and pandemic-related conditions.



Some **survey items were removed** either to make room for the new survey items or because they were not relevant to remote learning.

RESPONSE RATES DECREASED SUBSTANTIALLY IN 2020-21

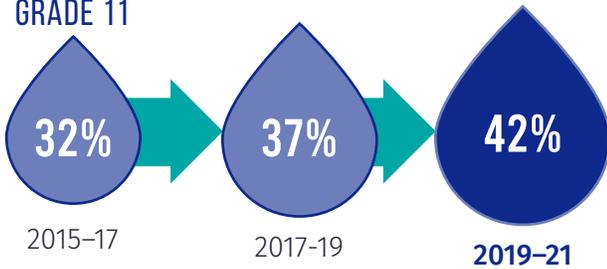


MENTAL HEALTH

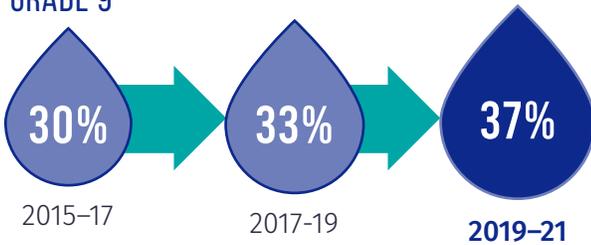
Increases in the number of students experiencing chronic, debilitating sadness or hopelessness add to the evidence of a growing mental health crisis for adolescents.

CHRONIC SAD OR HOPELESS FEELINGS

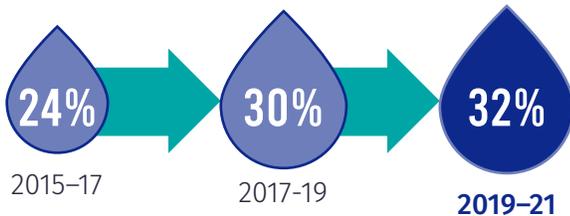
GRADE 11



GRADE 9



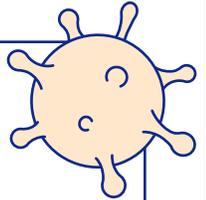
GRADE 7



PANDEMIC-RELATED CHANGES

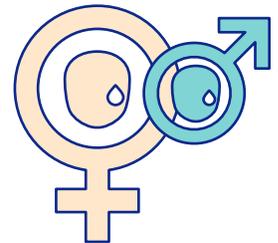


Chronic sadness increased **substantially** in the 2020-21 school year **at the height of the pandemic** and was most prevalent among students participating in school remotely.



PRONOUNCED GENDER DISPARITIES

In grade 11, **1 in 2 females** report chronic sadness compared to 1 in 3 males.



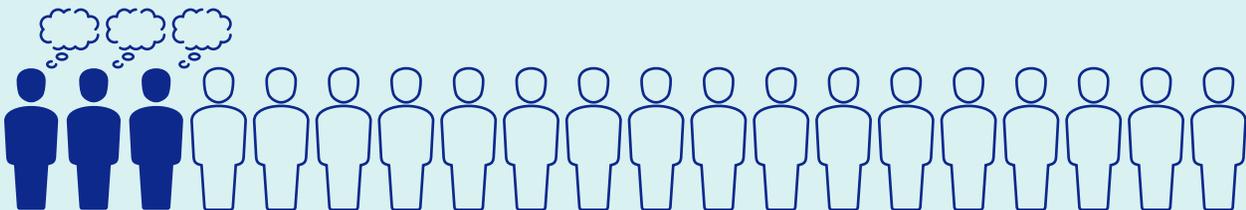
RACE AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

Among all racial-ethnic groups in all grades **African American students showed the largest increases** in reporting chronic sadness since the 2017-19 survey.



CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE

Changed little in 2019-21 but **remained at troublesome levels.**



About **3 out of every 20** secondary students, regardless of grade, seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months.

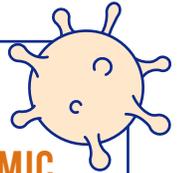
SUBSTANCE USE

Rates for any current use of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or a vaping device have been **steadily declining** over the past decade.

CURRENT USE (PAST 30 DAYS)

Students in Grade 11

-  **2%** **smoke cigarettes** ↓ down from 9% in 2013–15
-  **10%** **use a vaping device** ↓ down from 16% in 2013–15
-  **12%** **use marijuana** ↓ down from 20% in 2013–15
-  **14%** **drink alcohol** ↓ down from 29% in 2013–15



DECLINES IN SUBSTANCE USE ACCELERATED DURING THE PANDEMIC

Three pandemic conditions likely contributed:

 Increased amount of supervised time with **parents and family**

Decreased time with **substance-using peers** 

 **Decreased access** to substances and opportunities to use them



MARIJUANA USE IS AS COMMON AS ALCOHOL USE

Declines in use of alcohol have been greater than declines in use of marijuana, so that now **the two substances are about as commonly used.**

	2013–15		2019–21
Grade 11 Student Alcohol Use	29%	↓	14%
Grade 11 Student Marijuana Use	20%	↓	12%



Compared to other substances, students in grade 11 reported **less peer and parental disapproval for marijuana.**

REASONS FOR SUBSTANCE USE

Self-reported reasons for substance use suggest **a link between substance use and mental health.**

 To get away from problems

 To feel better

 Because of anger or frustration

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

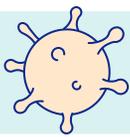
Academic motivation suffered immensely in 2019–21, particularly after the onset of the pandemic.

ACADEMIC MOTIVATION AT LOWEST REPORTED LEVELS

	Percent Reporting High Academic Motivation	Change from 2017–19
Grade 7	71%	-4 ↓
Grade 9	66%	-6 ↓
Grade 11	64%	-7 ↓

Levels are the **lowest reported** since the scale was added to the survey in 2013–14.

Less than 50% of all students agree or strongly agree that they try hard at school because they are interested in their work.

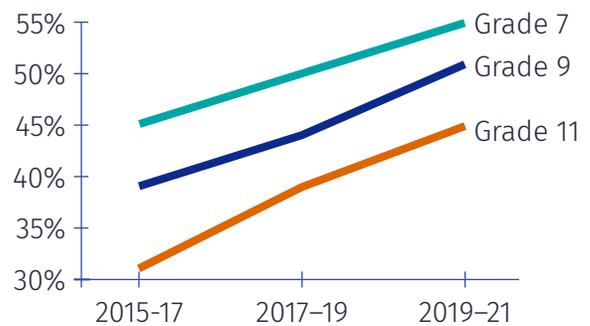


The largest declines in academic motivation occurred during the 2020–21 school year, suggesting pandemic-related factors were responsible.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Surprisingly, self-reported school attendance rates continued to improve, but these **results should be interpreted cautiously** given the low survey response rates in 2020–21. The attendance findings are consistent with the declines in the percentage of students experiencing any absences in 2020–21 found in the [California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System](#).

Self-Reported Attendance Rates



1 in 10 students were chronically absent, missing 3 or more days in the last month, which is a slight decline from 2017–19.



TOP 3 REASONS FOR ABSENTEEISM



Physical illness



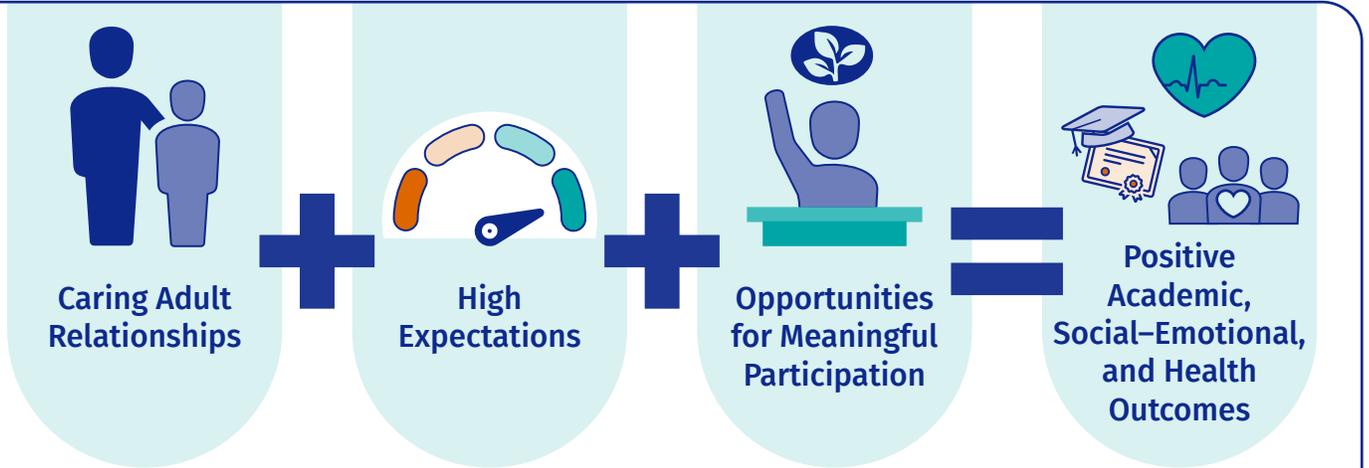
Not getting enough sleep



Feeling sad, hopeless, anxious, stressed, or angry

SCHOOL-BASED DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORTS

The **lack of progress in boosting pupil developmental supports** is not surprising given the challenges from the pandemic and shift to remote learning.



Student perceptions of developmental supports remained stable in 2019-21 and have not changed since 2013-15. About 1 in 10 secondary students reported that there were **no adults at school who really cared** about them.

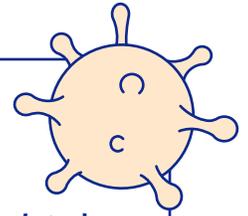


The fact that student perceptions of developmental supports remained stable in 2019-21, despite school closures and other pandemic-related challenges, **demonstrates the exceptional efforts that school staff took to maintain a supportive climate.**

Students in **grade 9 consistently reported the lowest** developmental support in school.



SUMMARY



Although caution is warranted due to the differences in survey administration and participation over the past two years, **some of the changes in the results undoubtedly are related to pandemic-related conditions.** These conditions disrupted classroom learning and students' interactions and relationships with their peers, teachers, and school staff; disrupted family life; exposed students to economic hardship and family illness; and reduced student engagement in both educational, extracurricular, and social activities.

The results confirm concerns about the adverse effects of these conditions on student learning and mental health. Conversely, these conditions likely had a positive effect on reducing substance use. Notably, the declines in indicators of learning engagement, mental health, and substance use occurred primarily at the height of the pandemic and school closures, in 2020–21. This timing suggests that a return to normal conditions may result in improvements in learning engagement and mental health but also may contribute to a resurgence in substance use.

More attention especially needs to be directed to improving mental health. Not only did chronic sadness continue to increase but also mental health indicators were related to both substance use and school attendance. Research suggests that one strategy to promote more positive student outcomes is to **focus more on fostering developmental supports,** which have shown little improvement since 2013–15.

The 2019–21 Biennial CHKS was conducted by researchers at WestEd—a research, development, and service agency—under contract from the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), with support from the California Department of Education, School Health Office, in fulfillment of the California Health and Safety Code, Section 11605.

The contents do not necessarily represent the views of the state agencies. DHCS Project Officer: Xitlalic Martinez.