

Trends in Pupil Engagement and Developmental Supports in California – Key Findings from the Biennial State CHKS, 2017/19

As part of California’s ground-breaking Local Control Funding Formula, beginning in the 2014-15 school year every school district in the state had to develop, and annually update, a three-year Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) to use as a roadmap for school improvement, targeting eight state priorities.¹ This factsheet summarizes the progress made by California secondary schools in one of these state priorities, pupil engagement, as well as on three developmental supports that research has shown to foster greater engagement in school—caring adult relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. It describes trends in indicators of pupil engagement and developmental supports between 2011/13 and 2017/19, the period prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis draws on data provided by representative state samples of students in grades 7, 9, and 11 that participated in the Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey (Biennial State CHKS).²

Key Takeaways

- Two indicators of pupil engagement—academic motivation and school connectedness—have been generally level between 2011/13 and 2017/19.
- In contrast, student attendance has increased substantially since 2013/15 – rising 6 to 8 percentage points during that period.
- No meaningful improvements in developmental supports from adults at school (caring adult relationships, high expectations, opportunities for meaningful participation) occurred. These developmental supports are linked to multiple positive outcomes, including higher engagement and connectedness.
- Except for improvements in attendance, these trends indicate California secondary schools were not doing enough to foster supportive and engaging school climates.

Academic Motivation

The average percentage of students indicating agreement (agree or strongly agree) on the four-item Academic Motivation scale increased markedly in all grades (by about five points) in 2015/17, but no further increase occurred in 2017/19. (Exhibit 1)

School Connectedness (LCAP Indicator)

School connectedness is one of the indicators of school climate that a California school district must address in its LCAP. The average percentage of students indicating agreement across the five School Connectedness scale items was 62% in 7th grade, 57% in 9th, and 53% in 11th. As with Academic

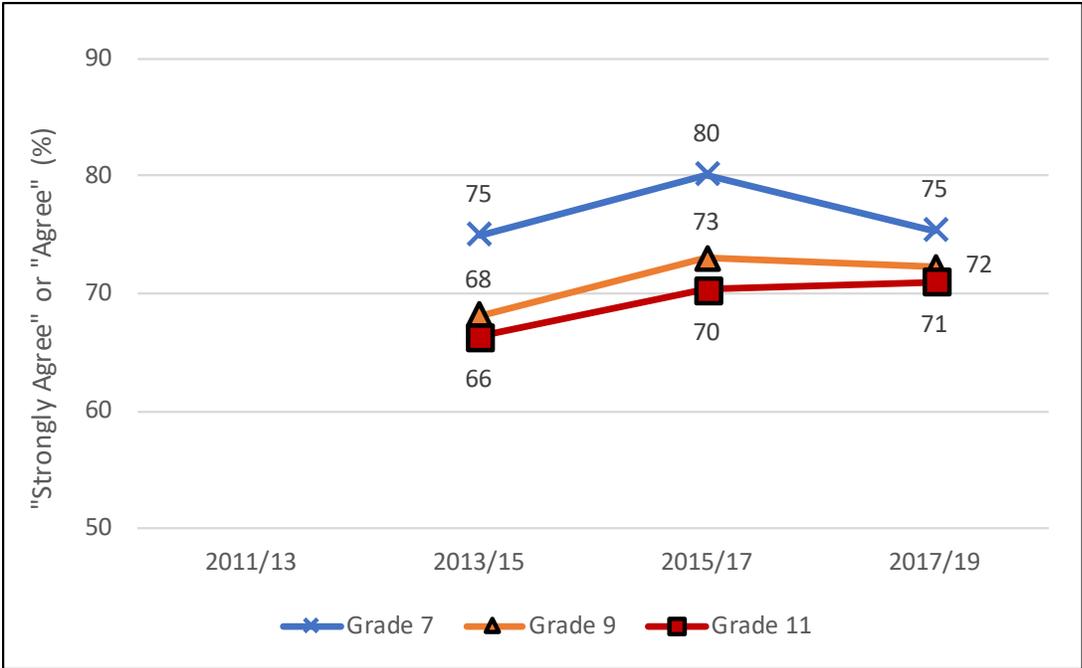
¹ See California Education Code, Sections 52060(a-d).

² For all of the latest Biennial State CHKS results compared to the previous three surveys, see Austin, G, Hanson, T., Zhang, G., & Zheng, C. (2020), *School climate, substance use, and student well-being in California, 2017-2019. Results of the seventeenth Biennial Statewide Student Survey, Grades 7, 9, and 11* (San Francisco: WestEd Health & Human Development Program). Download at <http://calschls.org/reports-data>. See also CHKS Factsheet #15, *LCAP baseline data on school climate and pupil engagement* (calschls.org/docs/factsheet-15.pdf), 2016.

Motivation, these results were lower in 7th grade and little changed in high school compared to 2015/17. Overall, School Connectedness has not changed since 2013/15.

EXHIBIT 1.

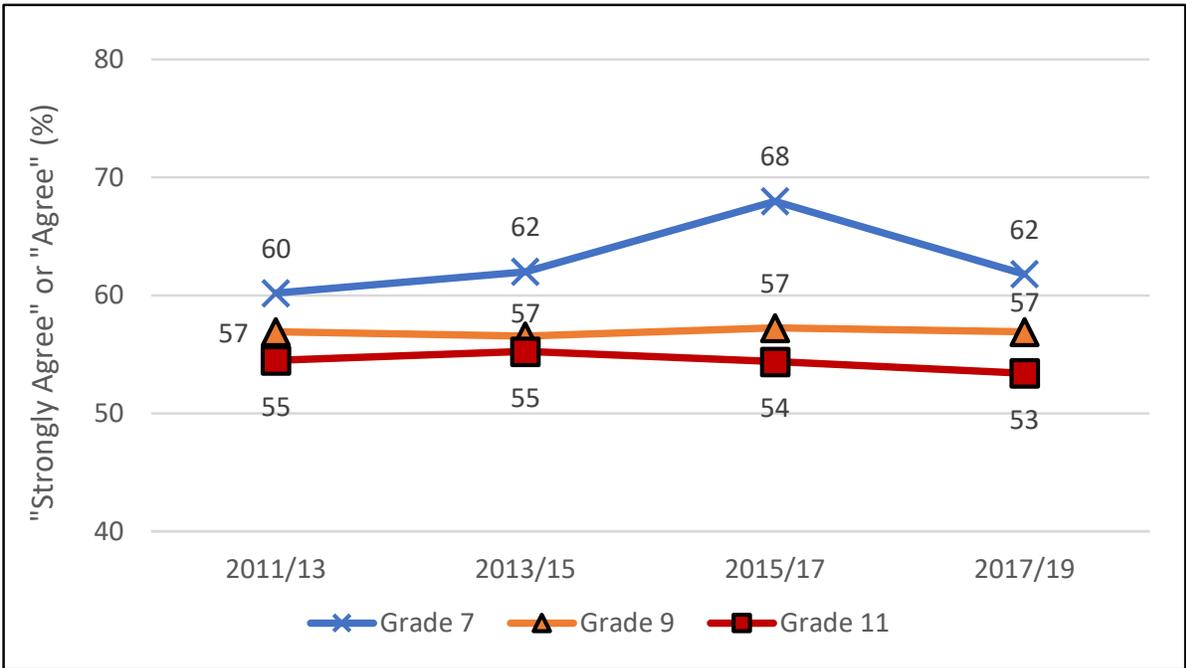
Academic Motivation by Survey Year



Source: Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2013/15, 2015/17, and 2017/19.

EXHIBIT 2.

School Connectedness by Survey Year



Source: Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2011/13, 2013/15, 2015/17, and 2017/19

Attendance

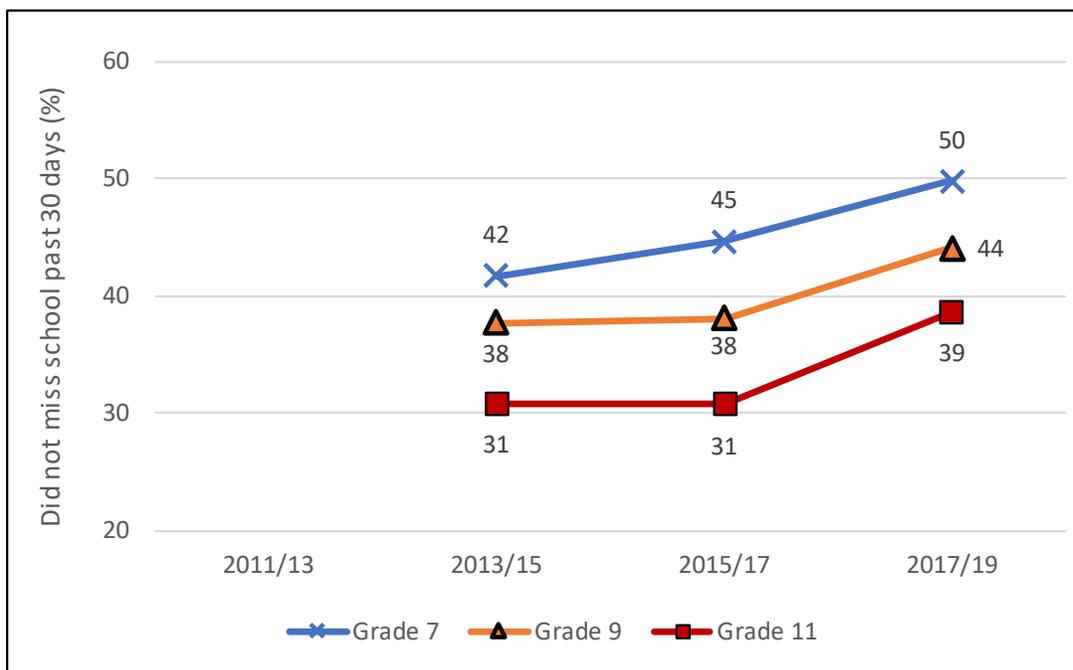
In one of the survey's most positive findings, the percentage of students reporting that they did not miss any school in the past 30 days improved markedly in all grades, by five–eight points, to 50% in 7th grade, 44% in 9th, and 39% in 11th.

Based on a new item, 13% of 7th graders, 15% of 9th, and 17% of 11th reported missing school three or more days out of the past 30 days, an indicator of chronic absenteeism.

The percentage of students that reported truancy (skipping school or cutting classes in the past 12 months) more than a few times is 3% in 7th grade, 5% in 9th, and 8% in 11th. Since 2013/15 there has been little change in the results for 7th grade but declines in high school, with current results two points lower for 9th grade and four points lower for 11th.

EXHIBIT 3.

School Attendance by Survey Year



Source: Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2013/15, 2015/17, and 2017/19

School Developmental Supports

Research has shown that when schools (or families or communities) provide three developmental supports—caring adult relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation—students are more likely to report more positive academic, social-emotional, and health outcomes. Access to these supports are important contributors to a positive school climate. In all grade levels, no improvements occurred, and levels currently are lower than in 2011/13. Most of the declines occurred in 2013/15. Since then, in high school, the percentages have continued to decline slightly or held steady. In 7th grade, percentages spiked in 2015/17 but dropped as much if not more in 2017/19 to levels below those in 2011/13.

- **Caring Adult Relationships.** About six in ten secondary students experienced a caring adult at school. The lowest rate occurred among 9th graders (56%, compared to 61% in 7th grade

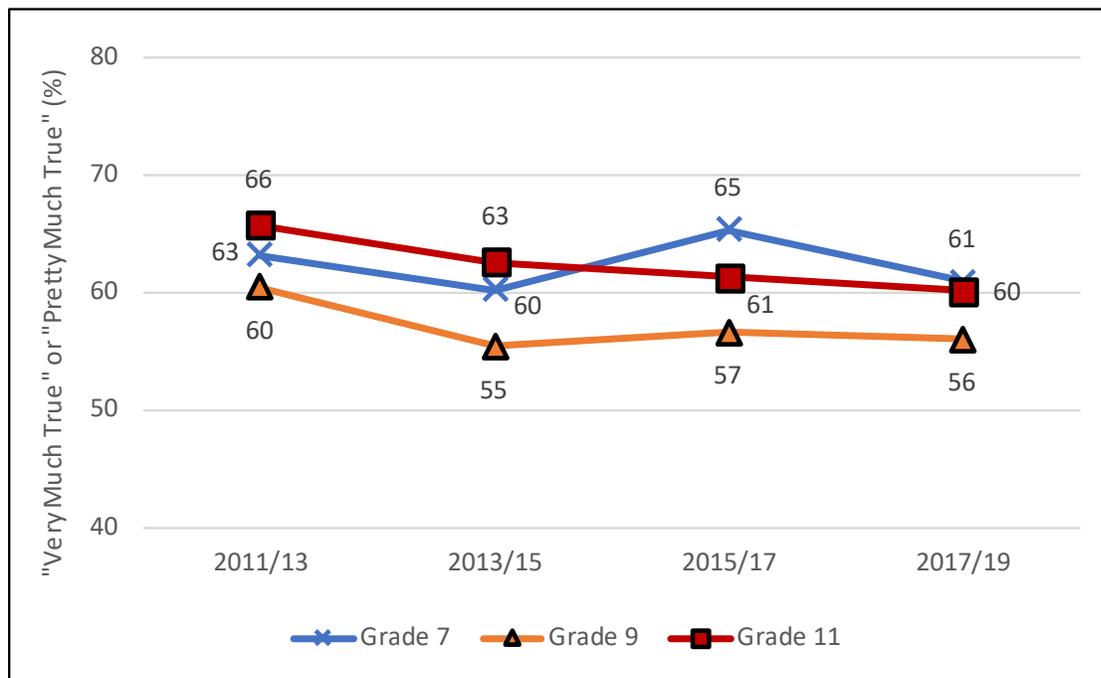
and 60% in 11th). Among 11th graders, current percentages are six points lower than in 2011/13.

- **High Expectations.** Around seven in ten secondary students have experienced high expectation messages, with rates highest in 7th grade (75%, compared to 68% and 69% in high school). The overall trends since 2011/13 are very similar in each grade to those for Caring Adult Relationships: a decline occurring in 2013/15 with results since then level except the spike in 2015/17 in 7th grade.
- **Meaningful Participation.** Approximately one-third of students in all three grades experienced opportunities for meaningful participation, with the highest agreement rate in 7th grade at 36%, compared to 33% in the high school grades. As with the other developmental supports, 2017/19 levels are lower than in 2011/13 and are also lower in all grades than in 2015/17.

Four in ten secondary students currently have not experienced a caring adult, about three-in-ten have not experienced high expectation messages, and almost seven in ten have not had opportunities for meaningful participation in school. No indicator has shown a consistent sign of improvement since 2013/15 except for the 2015/17 spike in 7th grade.

EXHIBIT 6.

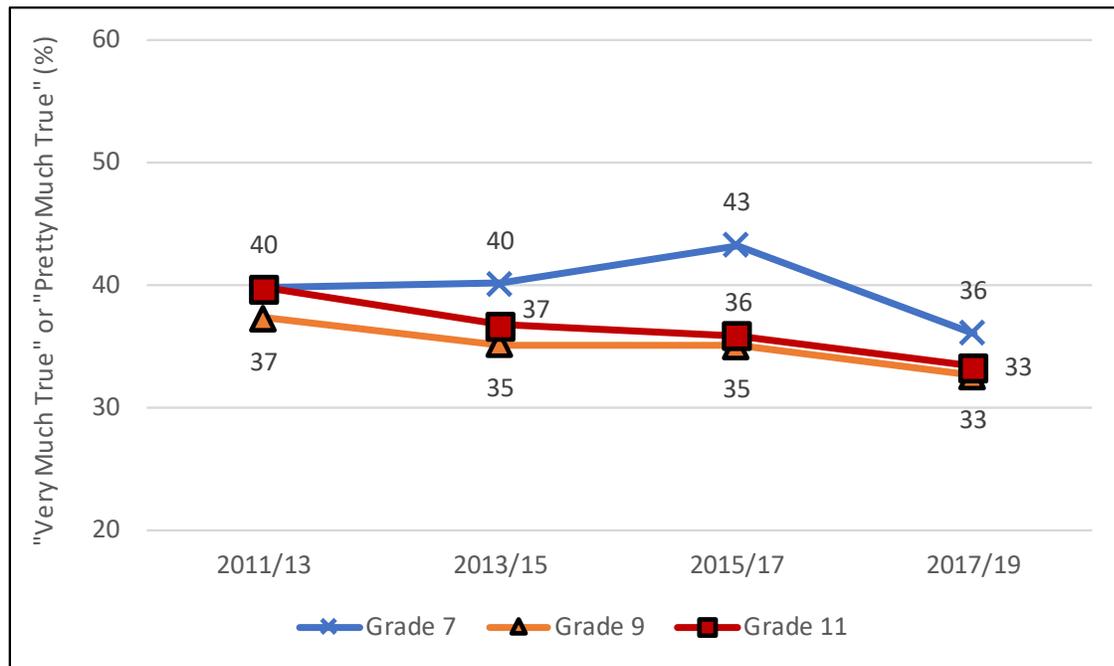
Caring Adult Relationships by Survey Year



Source: Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2011/13, 2013/15, 2015/17, and 2017/19

EXHIBIT 7.

Opportunities for Meaningful Participation by Survey Year



Source: Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2011/13, 2013/15, 2015/17, and 2017/19

Summary

Although school attendance increased substantially in 2017/19, little progress was made statewide on measures of the LCAP-priority areas of school climate and pupil engagement, prior to the onset of the pandemic. Moreover, schools were not making progress on improving the measures of developmental supports assessed by the CHKS –caring adult relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. This may help explain the lack of long-term improvement in school connectedness and engagement, despite being LCAP priorities. The lower levels of developmental supports for high school students is especially troubling given that high school students also exhibit lower connectedness, lower attendance, and higher truancy. The results suggest that more needs to be done to foster supportive and engaging school climates for students.

Suggested citation: Austin, G., Hanson, T., Zhang, G., and Zheng, C. (2021) *Trends in Pupil Engagement and Developmental Supports in California – Key Findings from the Biennial State CHKS, 2017/19*. CHKS Factsheet #19. San Francisco, CA. WestEd.

Appendix

Biennial State California Healthy Kids Surveys

The surveys were administered over two-year periods to randomly-selected, representative state samples of secondary students (grades 7, 9, and 11). Sample selection and data collection was embedded within the process of local CHKS administration by school districts under the sponsorship of the California Department of Education. Approximately 110 schools participated in each administration – 50 traditional high schools, 50 feeder middle schools, and 10 continuation schools. The surveys were conducted under conditions of strict anonymity and confidentiality. Results are weighted to reflect the sampling design, state student enrollment, and state enrollment composition by race/ethnicity. The California Department of Health Care Services provides financial support for the statewide survey. The state’s Committee for the for the Protection of Human Subjects, Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, approved the survey protocols.

Table A1. List of Selected Measures

Construct	Item(s)	Operationalization
Academic Motivation	<p>I try hard to make sure that I am good at my schoolwork.</p> <p>I try hard at school because I am interested in my work.</p> <p>I work hard to try to understand new things at school.</p> <p>I am always trying to do better in my schoolwork.</p>	The average percent of students indicating Agree or Strongly Agree on the items on the scale.
School Connectedness	<p>I feel close to people at this school.</p> <p>I am happy to be at this school.</p> <p>I feel like I am part of this school.</p> <p>The teachers at this school treat students fairly.</p> <p>I feel safe in my school</p>	The average percent of students indicating Agree or Strongly Agree on the items on the scale.
Attendance	In the past 30 days, did you miss a day of school for any of the following reasons?	The percent of students reporting that they did not miss any school.
Chronic Absenteeism	In the past 30 days, how often did you miss an entire day of school for any reason?	The percent of students reporting three or more days.
Truancy	During the past 12 months, about how many times did you skip school or cut classes?	The percent of students reporting once a month or more frequently.
Caring Adults in School	<p>At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult...</p> <p>who really cares about me.</p> <p>who notices when I am not there.</p> <p>who listens to me when I have something to say.</p>	The average percent of students indicating Pretty Much True or Very Much True on the items on the scale.

Construct	Item(s)	Operationalization
High Expectations at School	At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult... who tells me when I do a good job. who always wants me to do my best. who believes that I will be a success.	The average percent of students indicating Pretty Much True or Very Much True on the items on the scale.
Meaningful participation at school	At my school... I do interesting activities. I help decide things like class activities or rules. I do things that make a difference.	The average percent of students indicating Pretty Much True or Very Much True on the items on the scale.