

Trends in Pupil Engagement and Developmental Supports in California During the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic – Key Findings from the Eighteenth Biennial State CHKS, 2019/21¹

A major focus of the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) is assessment of pupil engagement, school climate and safety, and the developmental supports students receive from school staff (caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation). Pupil engagement and school climate are two of the priorities that the state requires school districts to monitor and to show improvement in their Local Control and Accountability Plans.

This factsheet summarizes trends in one of these state priorities, pupil engagement, and two developmental supports that research has shown to foster greater engagement in school—caring adult relationships and high expectations. 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) between 2013/15 and 2019/21—the eight-year period that culminated in the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic disrupted classroom learning and students’ interactions and relationships with peers, teachers, and school staff; disrupted family life; exposed many students to economic hardship and family illness; and reduced student engagement in educational, extracurricular, and social activities. The resulting school building closures that began in March 2020 also created administration challenges for the Eighteenth Biennial State CHKS, which further impacted the comparability of results to previous surveys.

Key Takeaways

- **Student Attendance.** Surprisingly, self-reported student attendance (the percentage of students reporting that they did not miss any school in the past 30 days) improved by five to seven points across grades, continuing the substantial upward trend in school attendance that occurred in 2017-19. Chronic absenteeism declined by two to three percentage points.
- **Academic Motivation.** Most concerning but not unexpectedly, academic motivation dropped markedly in all three grades, by four points in 7th grade, six points in 9th, and seven points in 11th. These are the lowest levels ever reported on the Biennial State CHKS.
- **Developmental Supports.** Despite pandemic-related school building closures and other factors, students’ perceptions of caring relationships with adults at school and high expectations remained stable between 2017-19 and 2019-21.
- **Impacts of COVID.** Student attendance increased and academic motivation decreased substantially in 2020-21. Attendance increased by 10–12 percentage points between 2019-20 and 2020-21. Academic motivation dropped by 10 percentage points during this one-year period. Caring relationships and high expectations did not change markedly between 2019-20

¹ The factsheet is based on Austin, G., Hanson, T., Bala, N., & Zheng, H. (2023). *Student engagement and well-being in California, 2019-21: Results of the Eighteenth Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey, Grades 7, 9, and 11*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd. [calschls.org/docs/Biennial State 1921.pdf](https://calschls.org/docs/Biennial%20State%201921.pdf)

and 2020-21. The fact that there was not a decline in perceived developmental supports during the pandemic is remarkable and demonstrates the exceptional efforts teachers and other school staff took to maintain a supportive climate.

Attendance

Student reported school attendance continued to increase in 2019-21. This would seem surprising given the disruption in schooling and decline in academic motivation, but unique pandemic-related conditions likely played a role.

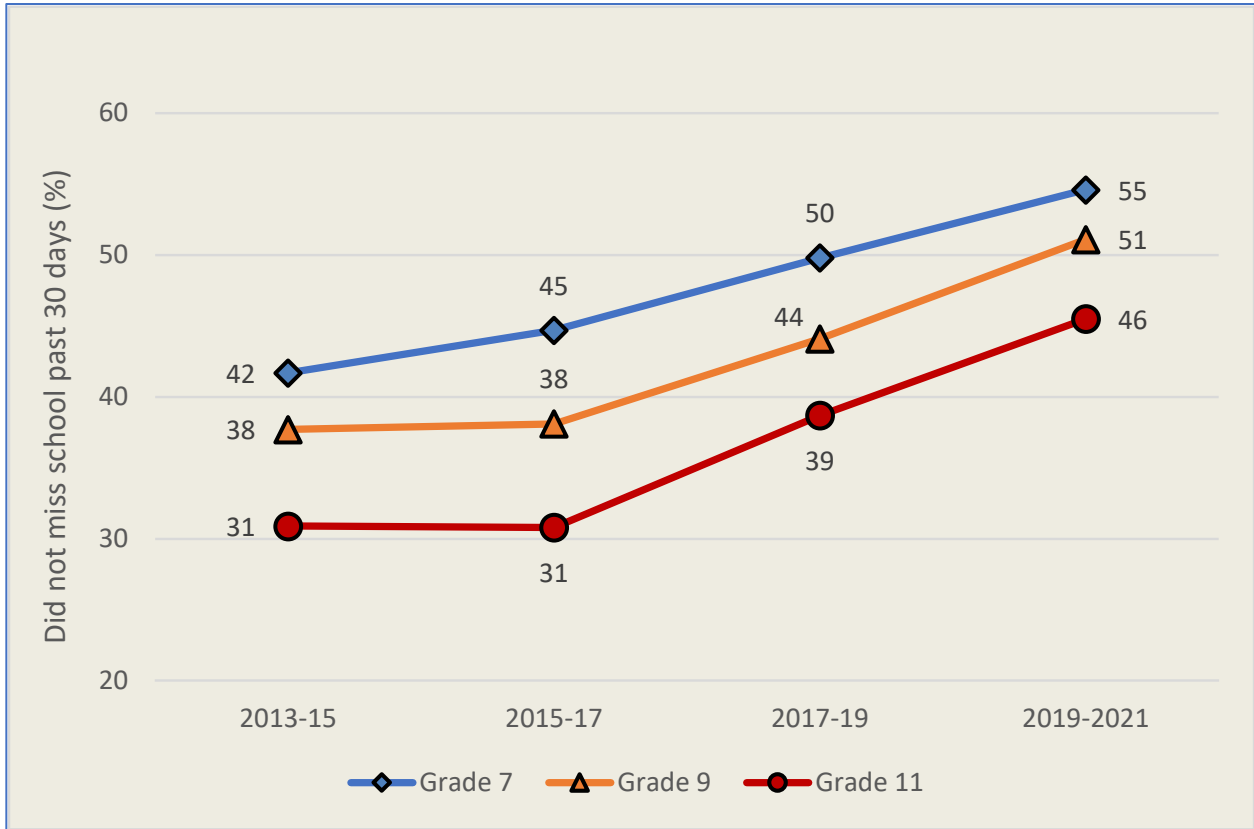
- When asked about the reasons for school absences in the past 30 days, the percentage of students reporting that they did not miss any school improved by five to seven points across grades, to 55% in 7th grade, 51% in 9th, and 46% in 11th. This continues the substantial upward trend that occurred in 2017-19. Among 7th graders, this indicator has steadily improved by 13 points since 2013-15. (Exhibit 1)
- Within the 2019-21 period, the percentage of students reporting that they did not miss any school in the past 30 days was substantially higher in 2020-21 than in 2019-20, increasing from 50% to 60% among 7th graders, from 47% to 58% among 9th graders, and from 41% to 53% among 11th graders. Student reported attendance was higher in 2020-21 than in 2019-20 regardless of instructional model. (Exhibit 2)
- On a separate item asking specifically about past 30-day absenteeism, no-absence results were very similar and chronic absenteeism declined by two to three percentage points, with 11% of 7th graders, 12% of 9th, and 14% of 11th missing school three or more days.
- There were no notable changes in the reasons for absences, except for a drop in all grades for physical illness, as also occurred in 2017-19.

It is important to note that student response rates were lower in 2020-21 than in 2019-20, and it is possible that students who did not attend school regularly were less likely to participate in the survey. This would artificially increase estimated attendance rates. However, similar 2020-21 increases in the percentage of students who did not miss any school are evident in CDE's statewide absenteeism data, suggesting that the Biennial State CHKS attendance results capture actual attendance increases.²

² California Department of Education. (2022a). *Absenteeism by reason data*. www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filesabr.asp

EXHIBIT 1.

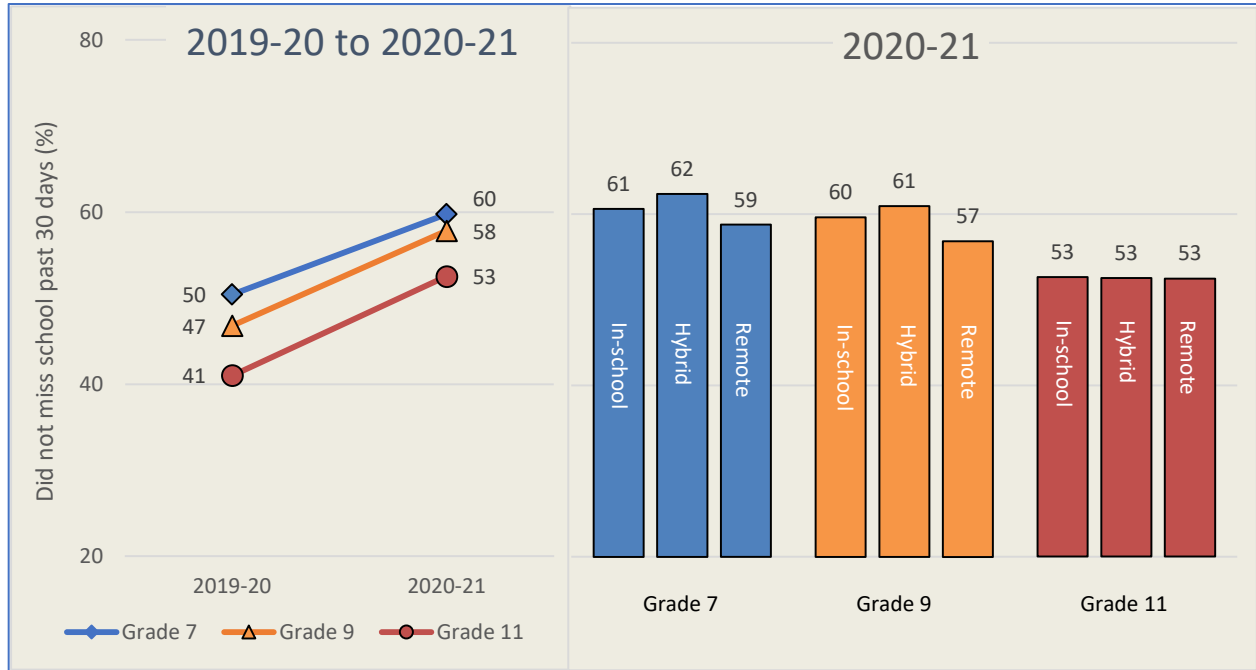
School Attendance by Administration Period



Source: Eighteenth Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2013-15, 2015-17, 2017-19, and 2019-21

EXHIBIT 2.

School Attendance by Survey Year and Instructional Model, 2019-21



Source: Eighteenth Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2019-21

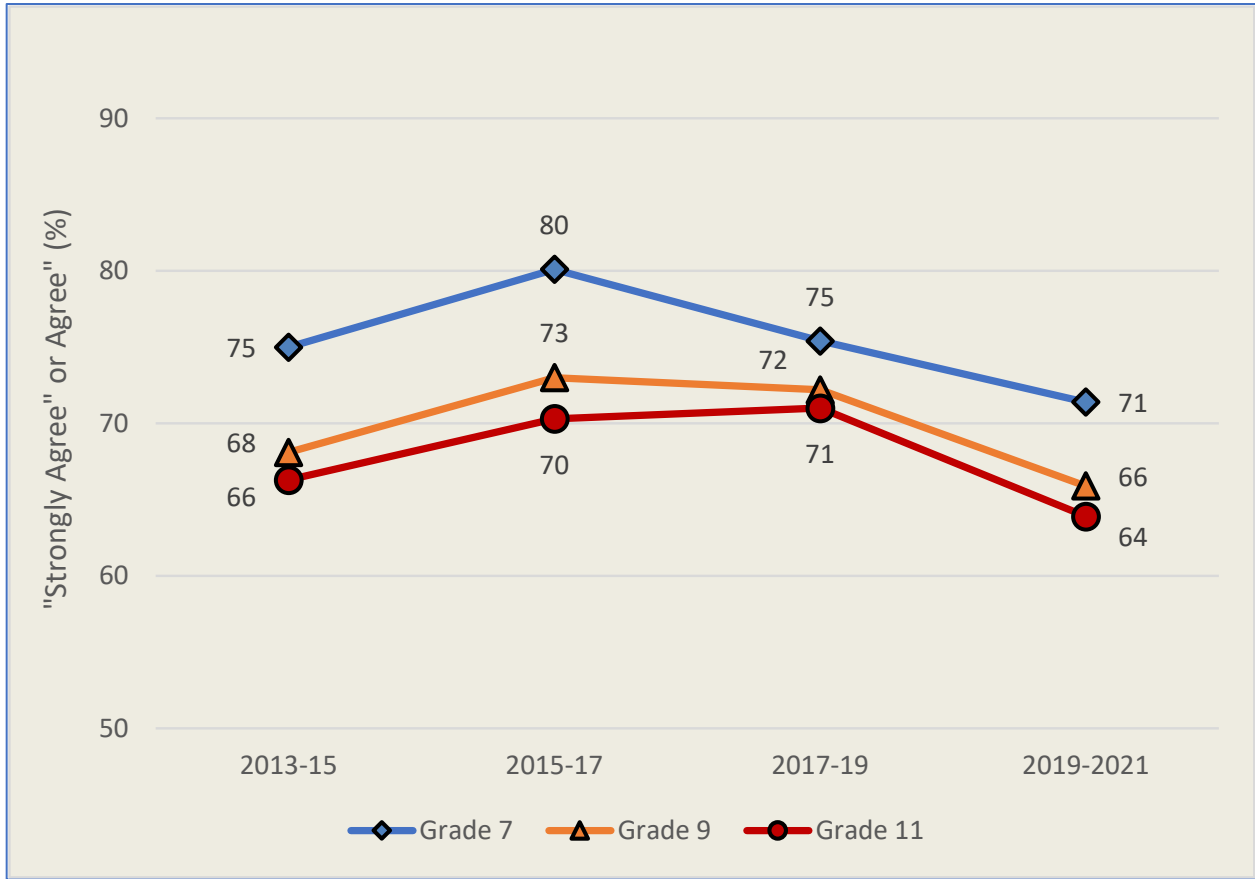
Academic Motivation

The average percentage of students indicating agreement (agree or strongly agree) on the four-item Academic Motivation scale declined substantially (from four to seven points) in all grades to 71% in 7th, 66% in 9th, and 64% in 11th. These are the lowest levels reported since the scale was added to the survey in 2013-14. (Exhibit 3)

Within the 2019-21 period, academic motivation declined the most (by about 10 points) in the 2020-21 academic year, with the lowest rates reported by students who attended school both in-person and remotely (hybrid instruction). This suggests that pandemic-related factors were mostly responsible for the decline. (Exhibit 4)

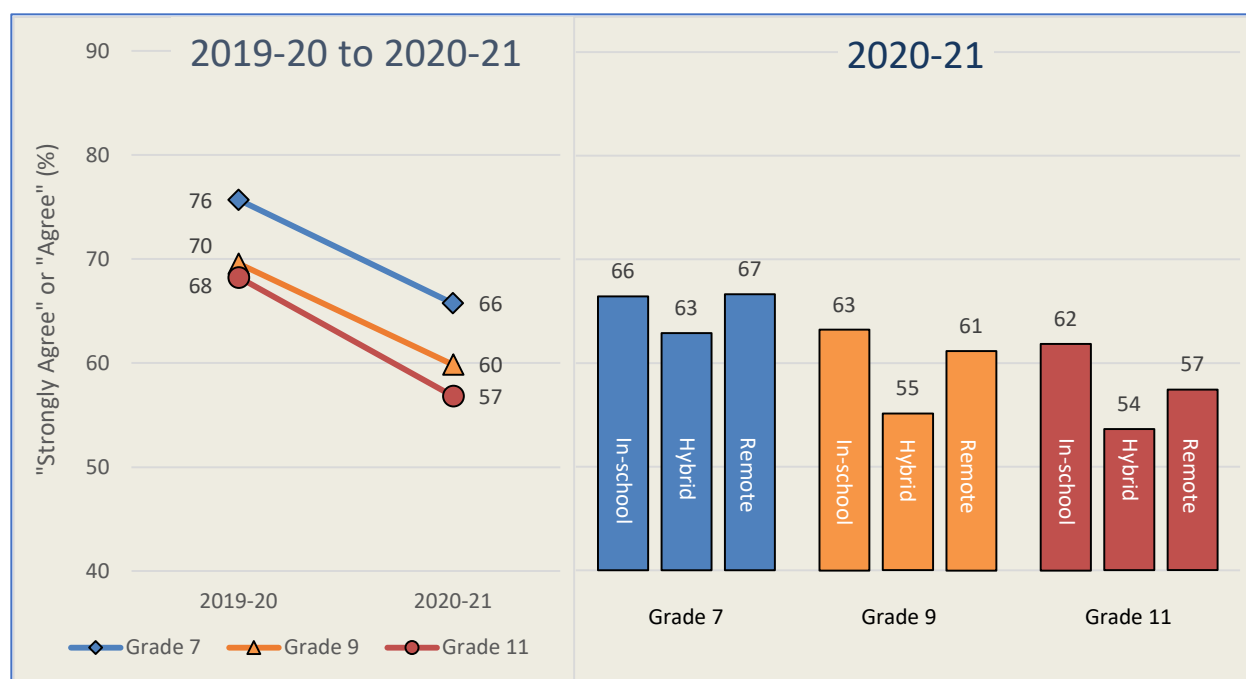
EXHIBIT 3.

Academic Motivation by Administration Period



Source: Eighteenth Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2013-15, 2015-17, 2017-19, and 2019-21

Academic Motivation by Survey Year and Instructional Model, 2019-21



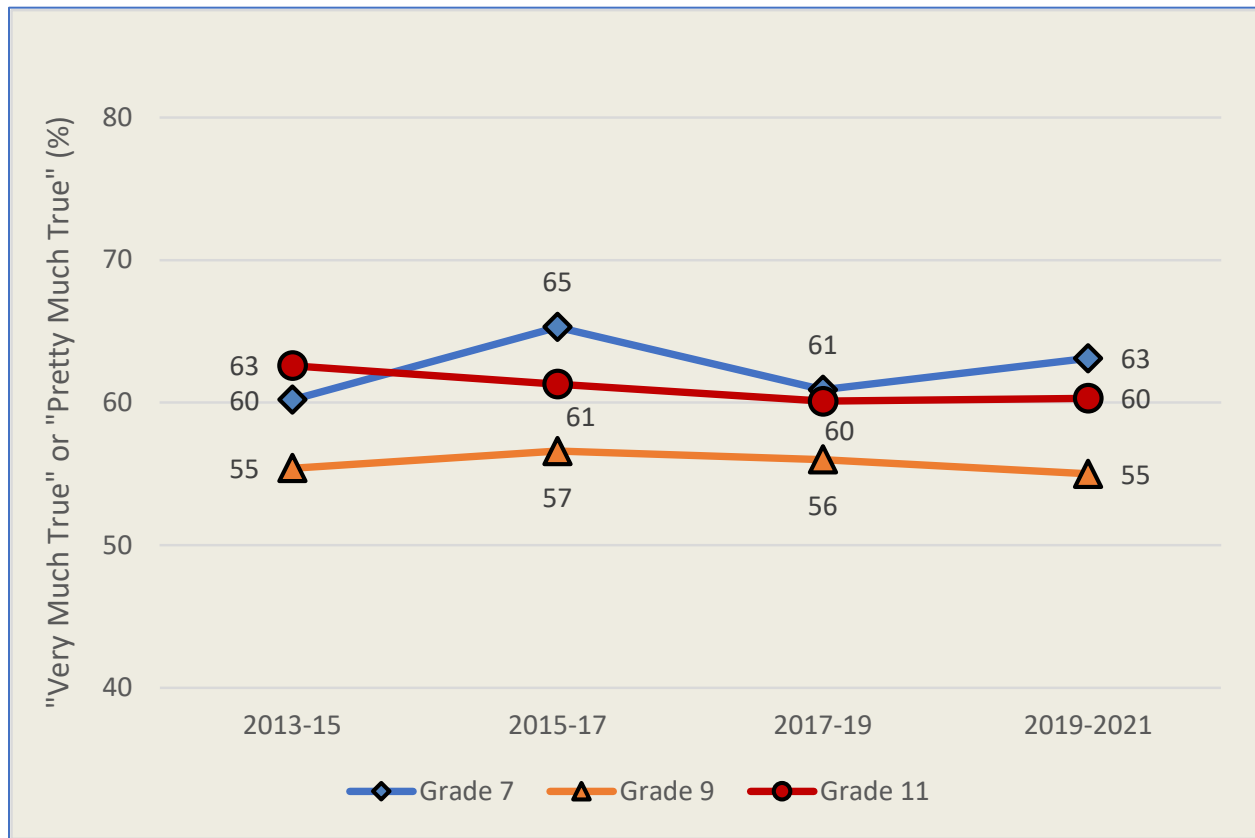
Source: Eighteenth Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2019-21

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. These supports are fundamental attributes of a positive school climate and foster higher levels of school connectedness and academic motivation. Looking at the average percentage of students who reported that it was “pretty much true” or “very much true” that they received each of these supports, there is little evidence of short- or long-term improvement. In high schools, most of the percentages have been the same or declined slightly since 2013-15. In 7th grade, percentages spiked in 2015-17 but then dropped to previous levels. Whereas engagement indicators tend to decline across grades, 9th graders consistently report the lowest developmental support at school. That there wasn’t a decline in developmental supports in the face of pandemic-related challenges is an indication of the efforts teachers and other school staff took to maintain a supportive climate in 2020 and 2021.

- Caring Adult Relationships.** There was a two-point increase in experiencing a caring adult at school in 7th grade, to 63%. But there were no changes among high school students, at 55% in 9th and 60% in 11th, rates very similar to those of the previous three administrations. (Exhibit 5)
- High Expectations.** Around seven-in-ten secondary students have experienced high expectation messages, at 76% in 7th grade, 67% in 9th, and 68% in 11th. These rates are little changed from 2017-19 or from the previous three surveys (except for the 2015-17 spike in 7th grade).

Caring Adult Relationships by Administration Period



Source: Eighteenth Biennial State California Healthy Kids Survey Data, 2013-15, 2015-17, 2017-19, and 2019-21

Summary

The increases in school attendance seem surprising given the disruptions to schooling caused by the pandemic, which undoubtedly contributed to the decline in academic motivation. Student response rates declined substantially in 2020-21, particularly for 9th and 11th graders. Although it is possible that students who did not attend school regularly were less likely to participate in the survey, these same increases in attendance are evident in CDE's statewide absenteeism data (California Department of Education, 2022).

Overall, these mixed 2019-21 results need to be treated with caution, given the unique pandemic-related conditions during the two years of data collection—with 70% of students taking the survey while participating in school in-person and 30% while participating in school remotely. Nevertheless, that no engagement indicator except attendance has shown consistent improvement since 2013-15 is cause for concern. And the 2019-21 increase in attendance may be a short-term increase due to the pandemic.

One reason for the absence of improvement in engagement indicators may be the continuation of low levels of caring adult relationships and other developmental supports students receive, especially in high school. These supports have been linked to school connectedness and more positive educational outcomes. Although the fact that there was not a decline in perceived developmental supports during the pandemic is remarkable and demonstrates the exceptional efforts teachers and other school staff

took to maintain a supportive climate, it is clear that schools need to focus on ensuring that students returning to their classrooms experience them as supportive and engaging environments.

Suggested citation: Austin, G., Hanson, T., Bala, N. and Zheng, C. (2023). *Trends in pupil engagement and developmental supports in California during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – Key findings from the Biennial State CHKS, 2019/21*. CHKS Factsheet #23. 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.

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 Protection of Human Subjects, Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, approved the survey protocols.

Participating schools included four schools serving students in grades 7, 9, and 11; 47 schools with students in grade 7 only; 46 schools serving students in grades 9 and 11; and 20 continuation schools. No surveys were obtained from 11th graders in one of the 46 schools serving students in grade 9 and 11.

Pandemic Considerations

Data collection for the Eighteenth Biennial State CHKS differed dramatically from previous administrations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Designed to be administered over a two-year period in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic year, survey administration in the 2019-20 academic year ceased in mid-March 2020 when the vast majority of California schools ended in-person instruction and nearly all students continued their schooling remotely. Just a handful of students took the survey in spring 2020. In addition, school buildings remained closed for most of the 2020-21 academic year and between two-thirds and three-quarters of students were participating in school remotely and took the survey in their homes rather than in classroom settings.

Although the Biennial State CHKS is designed to provide statewide prevalence estimates during a two-year time window, the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 complicates interpretation of the results. To aid in interpretation and to ascertain potential effects of the pandemic, the results in the report were sometimes disaggregated by survey year to depict how the results differ in 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Additionally, the Core Module was modified for students participating in school remotely in 2020-21, and some measures available in past reports are not available this year.

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.
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.
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.
High Expectations at School	<p>At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult...</p> <p>who tells me when I do a good job.</p> <p>who always wants me to do my best.</p> <p>who believes that I will be a success.</p>	The average percent of students indicating Pretty Much True or Very Much True on the items on the scale.