

FROM TURNOVER TO TURNAROUND

A case study on building trust, connection, & belonging in Stockton Unified School District

Prepared by



After nearly two decades of leadership instability, Stockton Unified School District (SUSD) was left grappling with eroded trust and a fragmented system. With Dr. Michelle Rodriguez's appointment as Superintendent of Schools in July 2023, the district has made a commitment to rebuilding trust through transparency and community engagement.

At the heart of the transformation is a bold "whole child" approach that prioritizes students' emotional well-being as much as their academic success. Innovative

programs like Sown to Grow give students a safe space to express their feelings, strengthening connections with teachers and staff, and proactively addressing needs. These efforts are embedded in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to ensure accountability and that every student's needs are met early.

With early wins like higher graduation rates, reduced absenteeism, and improved student belonging, SUSD is on the path to a true turnaround—changing experiences to transform expectations for what is possible.

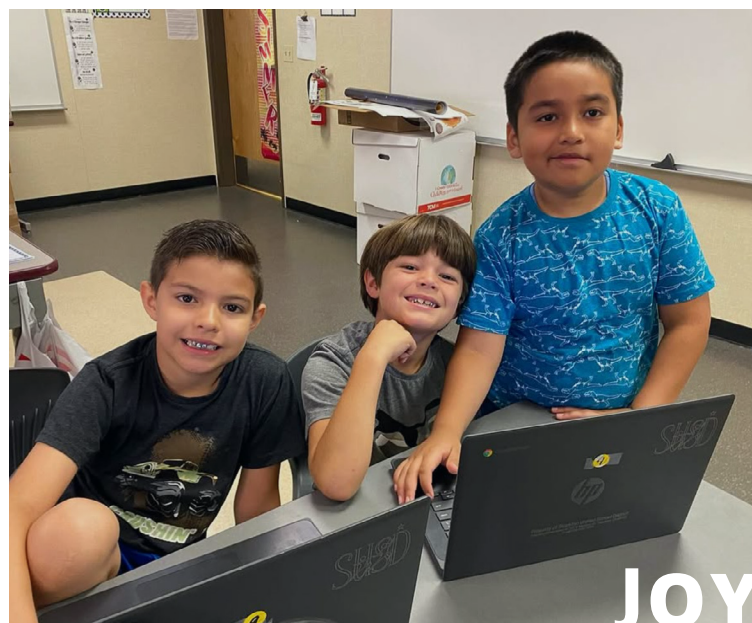
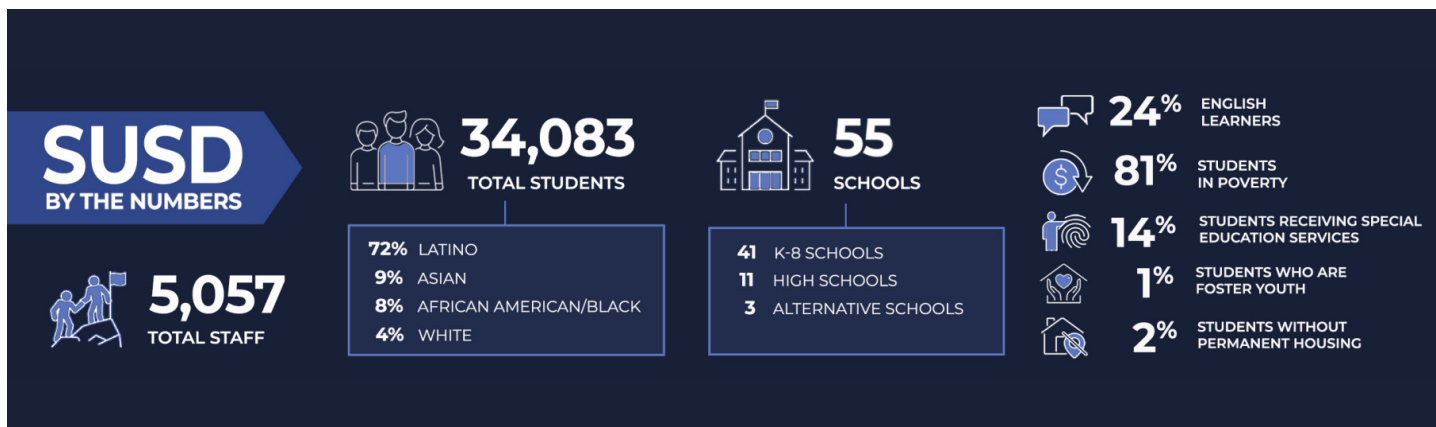


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FROM TURNOVER TO TURNAROUND:

Stockton Unified Anchors on Rebuilding Trust and Connection with Community As Foundation For Long-Term Change

Addressing A History of Instability

Stockton is home to one of California's largest school districts, educating over 34,000 students across 55 schools. And while intergenerational connections to Stockton are strong among families and school staff, for nearly two decades, Stockton Unified School District (SUSD) faced significant leadership turnover at the district level — cycling through 14 superintendents in just 19 years. Each transition disrupted departments and created a fragmented system of incomplete initiatives, ultimately eroding trust between the school system and the community.

When Dr. Michelle Rodriguez took over as the 14th superintendent of schools in that succession chain for the 2023-24 school year, she made a commitment to rebuild the broken trust. Her efforts have emphasized re-establishing joy and belief in the SUSD community, so that they had a strong foundation

on which to imagine new possibilities for the district, together. Dr. Rodriguez has championed that “you change experiences to change beliefs to change expectations,”¹ and began her tenure in the district with efforts to engage the community in earnest.

“You change experiences to change beliefs to change expectations.”

**—Dr. Michelle Rodriguez,
Superintendent of Schools¹**

“What one experiences, that actually builds their beliefs and their expectations. So our mission becomes, ‘how do we change the

experiences?’ Whether it’s for students who may not believe that they can learn, or parents who may not believe that there’s hope, or a teacher who may not believe they will get the support they need. We are changing experiences and making sure that we’re building efficacy in our community, so ultimately, we’re changing their expectations about what can be done and what is possible,” said Kasey Klappenback, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services.²

The Foundation of Trust: Listening and Transparency

Recognizing the challenges of rebuilding trust after years of disjointed and incomplete efforts, Dr. Rodriguez emphasized the importance of reform rooted in listening at all levels of the community.

"We want to reach the hardest-to-reach parent. We want to reach the hardest-to-reach student. And within those priority recommendations, you will see your fingerprints [for a strategy]," said Dr. Rodriguez.¹

This approach became a listening tour for Dr. Rodriguez and her most senior district leadership, which in the 2023-24 school year included 5 meet and greet events, 5 town halls, 11 listening sessions, 43 site visits, 13 "Conversations with the Superintendent" and department listening sessions, and a call for feedback through a "Let's Talk" messaging system that received 235 community comments.³ These efforts were widely publicized with an emphasis on accessibility to give all members of



Photo credit Bea Ahbeck, The Stockton Record

the community a way to voice their questions, concerns, priorities, and ideas. Twenty-one of these opportunities for input occurred within the first 100 days of Dr. Rodriguez's superintendent-ship, in order to quickly begin taking action that would change experiences for the SUSD community, and outreach continues today.

"Instead of making the assumption that I knew specifically what was happening, I identified four key areas that effective systems have," Dr. Rodriguez explained how her team set themes for reform to bucket community feedback under.¹

Those areas were quality assurance, high expectations, continuous improvement, and community trust. Within them, Stockton Unified district leadership outlined 44 actionable priorities, spanning 11 district departments.³ These ranged from physical improvements such as developing shade structures at all school sites, to more systemic efforts such as reorganizing the English Language Program to accelerate learning for newcomer and long-term English learners. The priorities were categorized as tier 1 through 4, indicating the level of complexity to address the need, and also documented on a [public accountability dashboard](#) where the slogan reads, "It takes all of SUSD to get it done."⁴



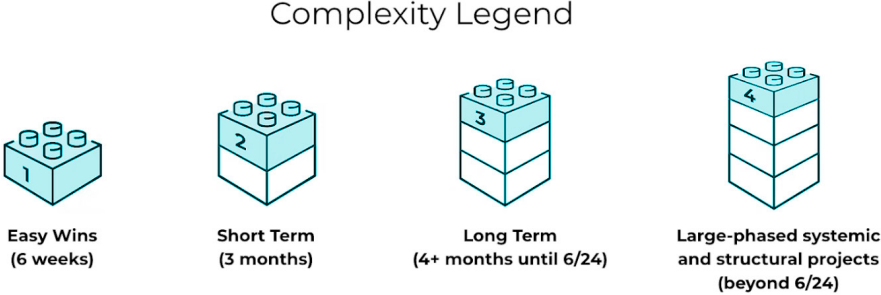
Adapted from Stockton Unified State of the District, 2023

“We had a multi-tiered plan to actually tackle some of those priorities, and we put them on the district website as they were being accomplished in the different levels. When we checked it off, we put an artifact on the district website to show that we followed through on what we said we were going to do. I think that was critical in building trust,” said Mr. Klappenback.²

It was important for the district to offer transparency into the concrete work being done by Dr. Rodriguez’s district leadership, and to establish early accomplishments that indicate to community stakeholders that progress on promises are possible in Stockton Unified. To date, the district

has achieved all 29 of its level 1-3 goals, and 3 of its 15 level 4 goals, with progress updates and clear steps being taken on each of the remaining 12 goals.⁴

The 44 priority areas informed by deliberate engagement efforts were not only a visible first step to rebuilding trust and belief within the community, they were the beginning of a shift within the district to centering on actionable goals with measurable outcomes. In the 2024-25 school year, the district released 6 revised 2024-27 LCAP goals to strategically anchor their longer-term commitments for transformation beyond the initial priorities.⁵



Adapted from Stockton Unified Public Accountability Dashboard: [All Of SUSD](#)

Stockton Unified School District LCAP Goals 2024-2027



Goal 1
Student Academic Achievement



Goal 4
Meaningful Partnerships



Goal 2
Centering Around the Whole Child



Goal 5
Success for Students with Disabilities



Goal 3
Passions, Interests, and Talents of the Modern Student



Goal 6
African American / Black Students Thrive

Adapted from Stockton Unified State of the District, 2024

Deep Dive on Goal 2: Centering On The Whole Child

One critical LCAP goal is the district's effort to "Center on the whole child," through support efforts that help Stockton regain confidence in the care students receive, not just academically, but as young members of the community.

Outside of leadership disruptions in recent decades, Stockton is a connected community with multiple generations of families involved with its schools, and many homegrown SUSD staff who came up within the district. Staff members have served Stockton Unified for an average of 13 years.³

"Kids have grown up with each other or have known that their parents grew up with each other. You can tell that sense of family-hood also transcends into the classroom."

**—Principal Dara Dalmau,
Elmwood Elementary (TK-8th) ⁶**

That level of continuity at schools can aid educators in building relationships with their students,

but it can also lead to assumptions about who students are and what they need if bridges for holistic connection are not actively maintained. Principal Dalmau acknowledged that while staff may know a lot about a student and their family, it can still be challenging for students to authentically share their feelings or when they are having trouble, especially if a student is experiencing a challenge at home.

"[Comfort with] reaching out to a trusted adult wasn't always the case. That was one of our lowest scores in our student surveys. It's a hard thing for students to do, so creating easier avenues for them is important," shared Principal Dalmau.⁶

This was underscored by direct requests from students across the district in the last two annual student panels, in which students asked for stronger connections at school. Stemming directly from that feedback and the lingering disruption to student-staff relationships from the COVID-19 pandemic, the district prioritized a whole child approach to deepening belonging as a foundation to student success across domains. The strategy emphasizes that by creating welcoming learning environments, in which students have agency to advocate for themselves and proactively receive support, they will be better motivated to show up at school, equipped to perform at their best, and encouraged to imagine future possibilities for themselves.



Photos from the SUSD Instagram page, September 2024 movie night & fireworks event. Events are part of the district's efforts to create community joy.

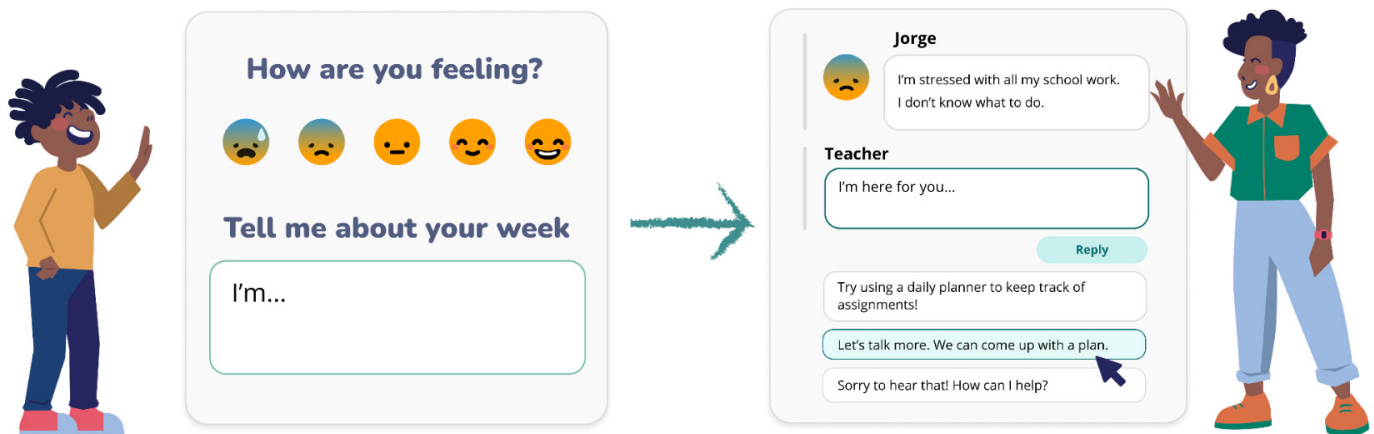


Creating Space for Voice & Well-being: Changing Experiences for Students & their Teachers

In looking to increase means for students to feel more connected across their campuses, many schools turned to traditional means of clubs and leadership teams, like the Buzz Team, a group of student leaders at Skills Elementary (TK-8th). Across every campus, the district has established similar Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS) Programs to capture voice and input from students. However, to ensure that every student — including introverted ones less likely to go after or be nominated for leadership roles — have an opportunity to feel like their voice matters at school, the district partnered with [Sown To Grow](#).

The digital platform creates space for students to consistently check-in, sharing how they are feeling and what is going on in their life that week. Teachers have the ability to respond back to students, and school leaders can see insights into well-being at the school and identify students that may need additional support.

“Sometimes we just need a place to kind of put our thoughts down first before we actually get those thoughts out. I have noticed that the more the students have had the opportunity to reflect on their weekly state of being, it has allowed them to actually reach out to a trusted adult. They’ve started to open up to people other than their peers and it’s helped with our communication amongst our community,” shared Principal Dalmau.⁶



Sown To Grow is a digital well-being check-in where students have an accessible space to share, teachers can respond, and leaders can provide support.

The Sown To Grow check-in does not replace in-person connections with teachers and counselors, but it offers them another avenue to feel heard or to open up about something that is difficult to voice. For a community of teachers who already had a strong connection to their students, this brought surprising insights and additional layers of depth to those relationships.

“With Sown to Grow, we’re changing experiences for teachers who might not have been super aware of what was going on with their students. Some of them were probably super aware. They were our

“We can start seeing that they wrote something, and then they find it easier to go, ‘I need to go see my counselor.’ Or ‘can I go see someone up in the office?’”

—Amy Saelee, Counselor at Elmwood Elementary⁷

trailblazers and go-getters... Whereas others, I think, see the importance of it as their experiences are being changed for themselves as well as for their students,” said Mr. Klappenback.²

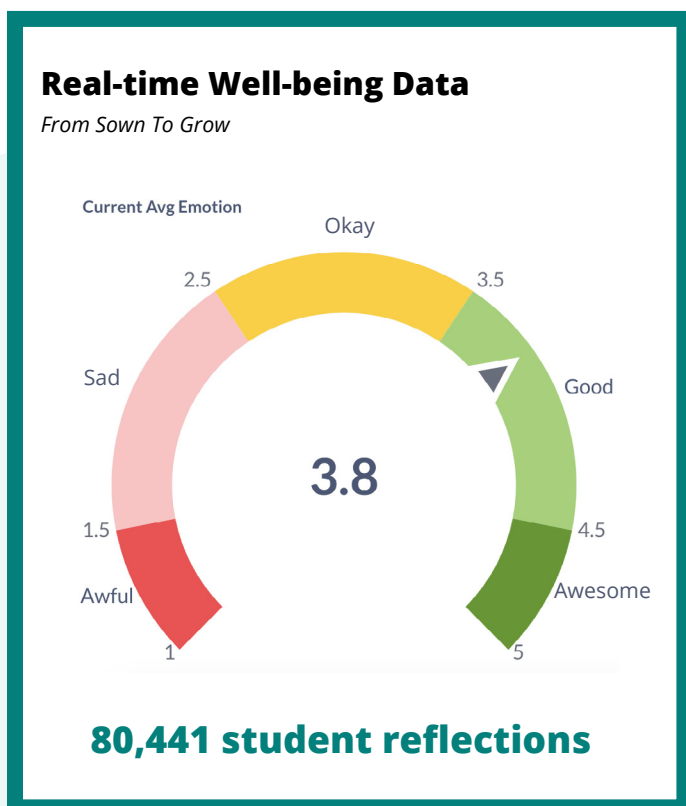
As students get into the routine of expressing themselves in writing, they increasingly gain comfort advocating for themselves and sharing in different formats with the adults at their schools. Students across the district have written more than 80,000 reflections so far in the 2024-25 school year.⁸

“We can start seeing that they wrote something, and then they find it easier to go, ‘I need to go see my counselor.’ Or ‘can I go see someone up in the office?’ This year, I feel like more students have been coming after school into the counseling office, just to talk and hang out and express their feelings and what’s going on in their lives even at home. So I think this has allowed them to express themselves more...and their feelings are being validated,” said Counselor Amy Saelee, Elmwood Elementary (TK-8th).⁷

Just as with the broader transformation efforts at the district, with increased emphasis on listening to student voice through student groups and platforms like Sown To Grow, the district has to ensure that the needs, perspectives, and ideas being lifted up do not go unanswered.

“It is important to do a better job of connecting our student voice efforts. It’s not just we listen to our students over here and then nothing. We’re connecting those dots for them and then also showing the students when we’re listening to them and making changes.”

**—Kasey Klappenback,
Assistant Superintendent
of Educational Services ²**

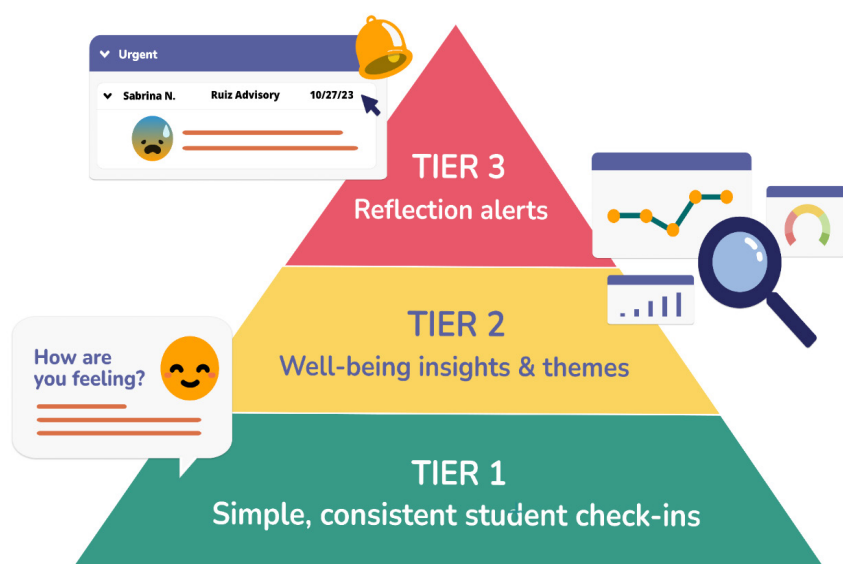


Strengthening Systems of Support

Stockton Unified has folded student voice and well-being efforts into the social-emotional and behavioral domains of its Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), an integrated, data-driven approach to addressing students’ needs. MTSS is designed to provide varying levels of differentiated support informed by student data inputs and indicators. Tier 2 and 3 support, requiring small group and individualized interventions respectively, can put strain on staff time and resources. To mitigate stress on the system and address student needs before they escalate, Dr. Rodriguez has led Stockton Unified to proactively emphasize Tier 1 efforts that distribute support across each school site.

Tier 1 for social-emotional and behavior at Stockton includes implementing SEL curriculum to teach intra- and inter-personal skills, establishing calming centers and safe spaces for students to





SUSD Investments in Student Support Staff To Enable MTSS

140	Counselors
6	Specialists
4	Child welfare & attendance
76	Elementary (TK-8th)
54	High School
54	Mental Health Clinicians

self-regulate as necessary, and the Sown To Grow check-ins to address some student needs early on with their teachers. While students still have experiences and struggles that may require Tier 2 and 3 support, by giving them tools and spaces to share and work through their challenges in the early stages, lower magnitude situations can resolve sooner, and support staff can focus on higher distress and externally-instigated student needs.

These structures also strengthen the safety net to ensure that students do not fall through the cracks, simply because their needs do not manifest in observable signals and behaviors. Those under-the-radar feelings and challenges are often the hardest for educators to identify, so by working a system for students to self-identify needs, student support staff in Stockton now have insights into students' emotional states that might otherwise go unnoticed with traditional referral systems.

Reflections that indicate a concern with a student prompt trigger alerts in Sown To Grow's system that go directly to the teacher, designated counselors and school leaders at the site to be addressed. In the 2024-25 school year so far, Stockton Unified has received 874 alerts from students, with 80% already addressed and the remaining alerts have support in progress.⁸

"I think it's that intention that matters. There's so much going on, but when those alerts pop up, it makes you pause and re-prioritize to support those students," shared Principal Dalmau.⁶

An increased ability for awareness of student needs also requires an increased capacity to address it. The district has made significant investment in counseling services with 140 counselors including: 6 counselor specialists, 4 child-welfare and attendance counselors, 76 elementary school counselors (TK-8), and 54 high school counselors. It has also increased training for implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), with cohorts of Stockton schools on track to receive state recognition for their PBIS programs.^{3,5}

Delivering On Accountability Structures: Changing Experiences for The Community and Partners

Stockton has made significant steps forward in proactive systems supported by investments in new programs and resources. These are visible signs to the community that SUSD staff are working to deliver on their commitment to students, connecting back to Dr. Rodriguez's goal as superintendent to change experiences for the community.



While before, Dr. Rodriguez shared that families may not trust in the system to “ask for a lot of resources and support for their child,” her district’s efforts aim to help families “Know what their child deserves and what is expected of us and then hold us accountable.”⁹

Accountability structures rely on systems that allow the district to efficiently and effectively make progress against the goals they put forth to the community. That involves integrating different sources of data to tell a complete story, as well as determining the appropriate actions.

“What is our data actually telling us? Every quarter we’re looking at the data because we want to be able to pivot and shift quicker than just yearly.”

—Dr. Michelle Rodriguez,
Superintendent of Schools¹

With regard to MTSS and student well-being, getting consistent data on how students are feeling from Sown To Grow with qualitative context into the thematic areas of support needed, allows the district to identify trends early, make appropriate shifts during the year, and measure results.

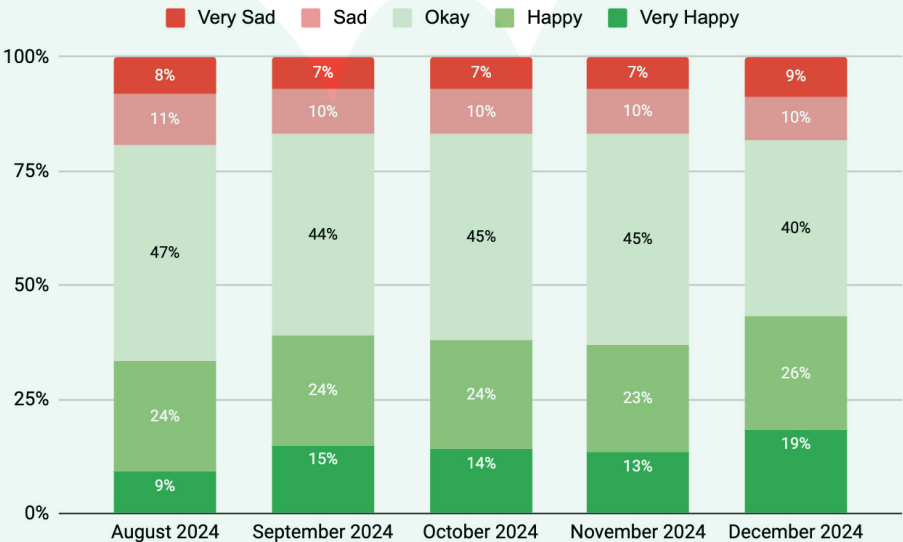
One tangible area where measurable accountability structures have been implemented is impact on student belonging. Stockton Unified has been able to take students who self-identified as having low sense of belonging at the start of the school year, based on their responses to indicator statements such as “I matter to others at this school,” and for additional support, and then follow the emotional well-being of those students throughout the year. Over the first semester of the 2024-25 school year alone, those students reported an 12% increase in reported positive feelings, and will continue to monitor progress through the remainder of the school year.⁸ The district and its partners are holding themselves to a high standard for tangibly delivering on needs.

“It is really important to build systems that will hold people accountable that are serving our students...We have a process where we can say to our providers, ‘we want a great partnership with you but we’re also gonna hold you accountable to serving those students and having great impact based on their needs.’...We’re matching the input we get from our stakeholders with the student needs from the different types of data that we have,” emphasized Klappenback.²

12% Increase in student-reported feelings of happiness for students expressing “low sense of belonging” at the start of the school year.

From Sown To Grow weekly check-in data, Fall Semester 2024.

Students who expressed “rarely” or “never” on indicator statements, such as “I matter to others at this school.” n=823



Early Indicators of Turnaround

While much of Dr. Rodriguez and the Stockton Unified leadership’s work still lies in front of them, the early efforts have set a foundation on which they can continue to build. Establishing early wins based on direct input and transparently communicating progress has gained traction in mending trust. While some staff and community members will take time to win over, gains in some of the district’s most outward metrics of success help, and SUSD’s commitment to data-driven decision-making provides optimism for sustained progress.

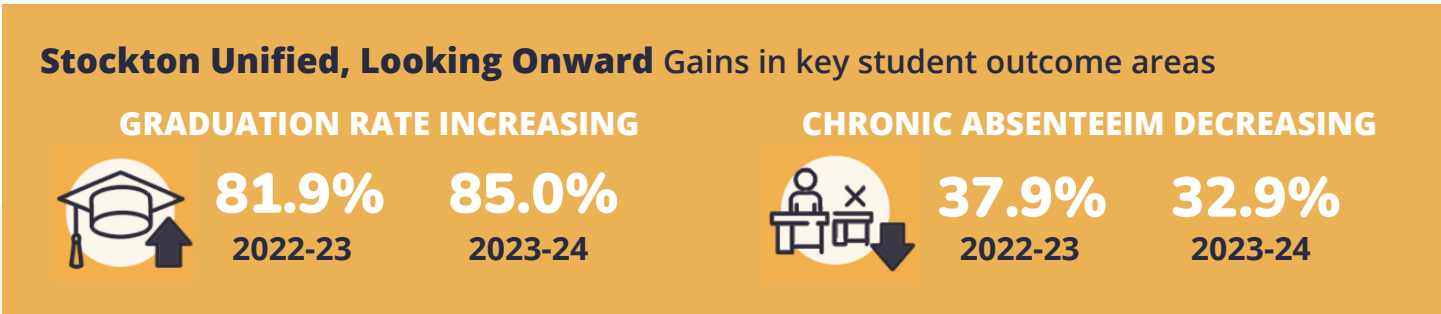
“As we’ve been looking at our whole child work, we have had our highest grad rate ever. Our chronic absenteeism is being reduced and we are reducing our suspension rates as well. That’s super important to keep going back to because social emotional



learning connects to academic learning too. I think the more we can connect all of it together, it will improve and it will build our students’ academics up at the same time,” Klappenback said.²

Stockton Unified School District’s start to turnaround is a testament to the power of listening, collaboration, and intentionality. Through continued innovation and partnership, the district sets its sights on a vision of unparalleled educational experiences for all, inviting the community to imagine future possibilities together.

“If our students are feeling good about themselves, if our teachers are feeling efficacious, if our community feels cared about and like we’re valuing their input,” shared Klappenback, “then we will change experiences. We will change beliefs and change expectations.” ²



Adapted from Stockton Unified State of the District, Fall 2024 & California School Dashboard - Stockton Unified



Photo from the SUSD Instagram page, January 2025, celebrating staff of the month



Photo credit Bea Ahbeck, The Stockton Record

About Sown To Grow

[Sown To Grow](#) is a comprehensive student support platform that empowers schools and districts to improve student social, emotional, and academic well-being through an easy and engaging reflection and feedback process. Designed by a team of educators for practical classroom impact, Sown To Grow offers a simple Tier 1 practice for building sense of belonging and key life skills, with actionable pathways for identifying Tier 2 & 3 needs. Students start with a focus on emotional wellbeing, and can expand to SEL competencies and/or academic goal-setting over time.

Students and teachers can see their emotional well-being journey, while counselors, social workers, and MTSS leaders gain real-time understanding of student emotions and needs. Insights into which students are feeling down, reflection themes, and alerts for concerning student responses allow leaders to proactively identify and support student Tier 2 & 3 needs. This actionable data serves as the foundation for MTSS, Rtl, PBIS, and community schools systems.

The system includes expert PD/training, built-in SEL assessment, supporting curriculum, and powerful artifacts of student growth. Sown To Grow is funded by the US Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, Digital Promise, and New Schools Venture Fund.

Contributing to research that advances the literature on the impact of social emotional learning and relationship-driven pedagogical practices is a core commitment of Sown To Grow. For more information on evidence of impact and research partnership opportunities, reach out to research@sowntogrow.com.

Endnotes

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6. Dara Dalmau (Principal, Elmwood Elementary School), in a school site interview with Kelsey Aijala, Stockton, CA, October 2024.
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Meet with Sown To Grow to learn about their partnership with Stockton Unified and school districts across the country.