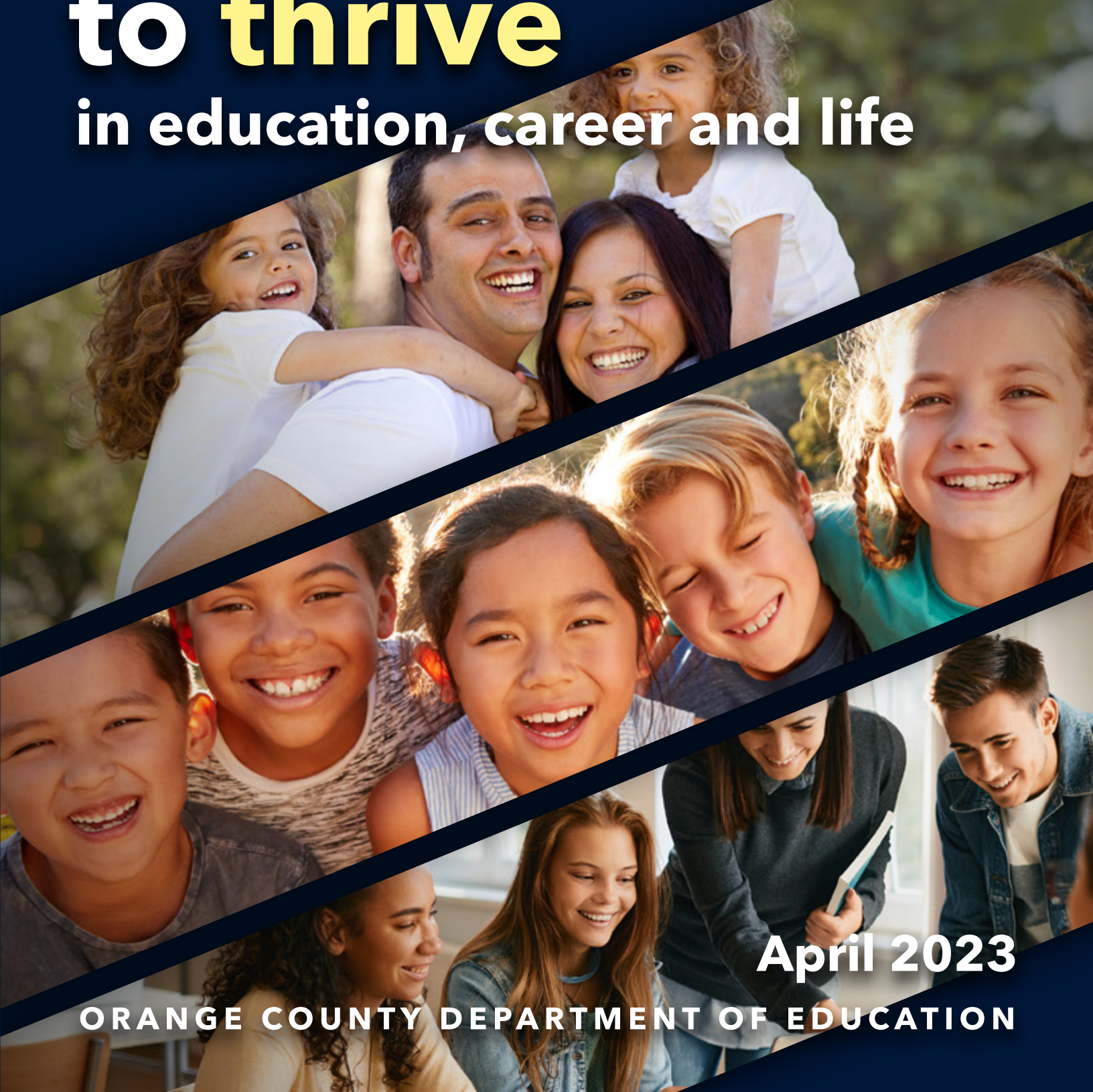


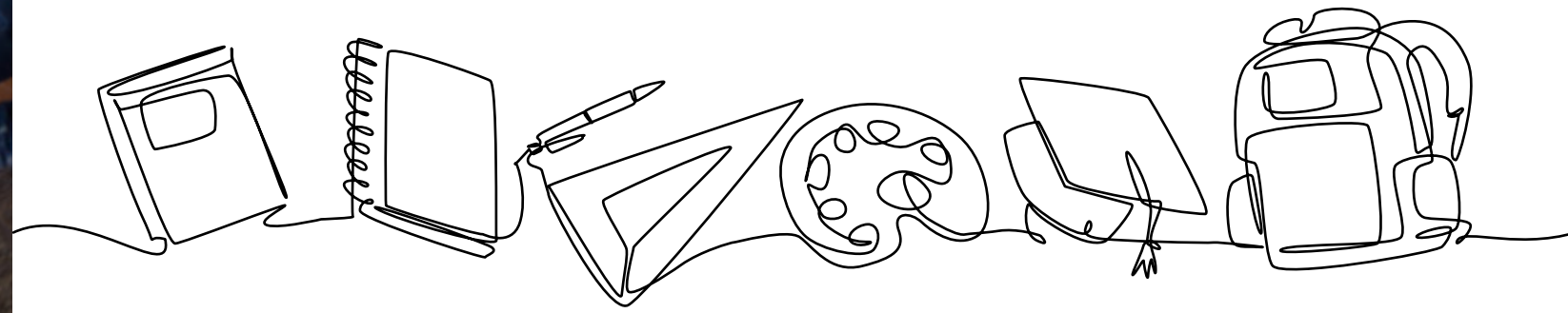
Empowering students to thrive

in education, career and life



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ORANGE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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By empowering students to thrive, we equip them to succeed in education, career and life.

What does it mean for a student to thrive? And how can families, educators and communities work together to ensure young people are thriving in all aspects of their lives? These are two of the central questions addressed in “Empowering Students to Thrive,” a strategic vision for Orange County.

By virtually any measure, Orange County is a success story. Ours is the sixth most populous county in the United States, known internationally for its vibrant and diverse communities, sunny beaches, distinguished universities and innovative industries, along with renowned shopping and tourism attractions. We are also home to some of the highest-performing schools in California and the nation. Yet, mirroring national trends, we face the reality that too many of our young people are not thriving. Even among those who consistently achieve at high levels academically, we have witnessed alarming rates of depression, anxiety and other conditions that generally predate the pandemic.

Which brings us back to our initial question: What does it mean to thrive in 2023?

For students, thriving should not be confused or conflated with academic success – or merely having their basic needs met. Instead, thriving can be defined as how well children and teens are flourishing physically, socially, emotionally and, yes, academically. Thriving is often aided by personal qualities like resilience and a growth mindset, but it also comes with having a sense of belonging at school and in the community. Moreover, young people are more likely to thrive when they have access to support systems and resources that can help them navigate life’s inevitable challenges.

This strategic vision is focused on empowering Orange County students to thrive by building on their strengths and assets and working together to create the conditions necessary for them to overcome obstacles, to reach their full potential and to lead healthy, fulfilling lives. The pages that follow attempt to capture some successful strategies that can be scaled up, as well as effective practices that can be replicated. At the same time, this document is heavily informed by in-depth interviews and conversations with students, teachers, parents, educational leaders, public health experts and other important community partners whose insights and ideas have coalesced around key themes.

One of the biggest takeaways is the need to strengthen collaboration and communication among our schools, districts, families, public agencies, elected leaders, faith communities, service providers and other groups that serve children and families, because we know collaborative communities can become greater than the sum of their parts. At the same time, we must continue to work with our region’s colleges and universities to increase the number of candidates entering fields related to student thriving, and we must bolster resources for teachers and other school-based professionals who are already on the frontlines.

This report is not intended to sit idle on a shelf, nor is it the final say on the matter. On the contrary, I hope this research will spark ongoing conversations in homes and schools about how we can work together to create environments where every student is able to thrive. While the challenges we face today may be national in scope, Orange County truly is well positioned to engage in this work and to provide a roadmap for other counties to follow. To put it another way, there’s no reason solutions can’t start here and now, with us. By empowering students to thrive, we know we are equipping them to succeed in education, career and life. And we are making a wise investment in our own collective future.

Al Mijares, Ph.D.
Orange County Superintendent of Schools



A shared vision of Orange County students thriving

As parents, we want our children to thrive. We know that when our children are thriving, they enjoy life, they feel good, they know how to navigate through challenges, and they succeed in school and in all the things that matter to them.

In Orange County, California, more than 500,000 children and young people attend preschool, elementary school, middle school and high school. Every one of these students is a person of infinite worth who is gifted and valuable and worthy of our best efforts. Each child has the potential to make a unique and profound contribution to their family, their community and our society. Their stories are unfolding, and right now school is one of the most important parts of their world.

We know that effective schools partner with families to empower students to thrive. Caring and competent educators team with parents and students to ensure that schools are welcoming

and supportive communities where learning is facilitated and celebrated. Effective schools understand that students are whole people whose minds, bodies, spirits and emotions are all interconnected and essential to the student's growth and success.

Effective schools celebrate the beauty and wonder of life and learning. They embrace our shared humanity and our extraordinary diversity. Sometimes, though, life can be hard. Children and young people have faced major challenges in their lives, including a global pandemic. Moreover, every student's journey is different. Sometimes support systems at home, school and in the community are helping them thrive physically, emotionally and academically. Sometimes support systems are disrupted and thriving is harder.

Many families and schools have experienced disruptions during the COVID-19 crisis, and

students in turn have faced big challenges. These recent challenges, combined with other developmental stresses and social tensions, have caused some students to feel overwhelmed.

This strategic vision for student thriving describes how schools and educators in Orange County are working with families and community partners to encourage student thriving in all the dimensions of their lives. Orange County schools come in many shapes and sizes to meet the needs of many different kinds of students. Yet when students receive the support they need and draw on the many assets – or positive strengths and supports – of their families, schools and communities, the likelihood is far greater that they will succeed in their education, career and life.

Over the past 10 years, the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) and the school districts of Orange County have worked together with students, families and community partners to equip students to succeed in college and career. And Orange County students continue to make great strides and achieve great successes.

Orange County districts have been leaders in expanding access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses and increasing the number of students passing the rigorous AP exams (Hanigan, 2018). In addition, the award-winning OC Pathways consortium, which includes all 28 local school districts, has been recognized as one of the most effective programs in the state for preparing students for career success (Pichardo, 2021). In addition to college and career readiness, Orange County students are excelling in a host of fields, from science and literature to the arts, athletics and civic engagement, as represented in the feature story at the end of this section.

While reports about students and schools often start with a dire catalog of difficulties, we begin with a recognition of the extraordinary assets of our students. We see our students as remarkable people with rich and diverse gifts drawing on family and community resources that contribute daily to their thriving. The Search Institute has documented during 70 years of research that developmental assets contribute to student thriving. Orange County schools aim to collaborate with students, families and communities to expand these assets and tap into



these resources. Students' internal assets include things like caring for others, having a sense of purpose, exercising cultural competence, serving others and taking responsibility. External assets may include things like having parent involvement in their schooling, having other positive adults in their lives, and being involved in a religious community.

Some developmental assets are specific to the student's school experience, and Orange County schools are committed to providing these assets to every student, such as a caring school climate, plenty of creative activities to be involved in, a clear sense of boundaries, and high expectations.

When families, communities and schools support students with strong developmental assets, students are more likely to thrive. Internal assets

can be cultivated both in school and through community involvements beyond school.

Students who cultivate a growth mindset, who learn from hardships and who recognize that they can take on difficult challenges are much more likely to achieve success. Carol Dweck, the Stanford University professor of psychology and education, writes (2006): "The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives."

At school, students thrive when educators offer effective academic instruction; create classroom environments that are welcoming and caring; value the student's experiences, interests and cultural and linguistic resources;

and help students cultivate a growth mindset, compassion, character and emotional intelligence. The importance of emotional intelligence (the capacity for self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making) has been highlighted by leadership experts like Warren Bennis, distinguished professor of business administration and founding chairman of The Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California, who wrote: "Emotional Intelligence, more than any other factor, more than I.Q. or expertise, accounts for 85 percent to 90 percent of success at work."

Recognizing the gifts of our students, the support of our families, the commitment of our schools and the assets of our communities, we envision a county in which every student thrives. We envision vital relationships among families and

educators that make schools a welcoming and supportive environment for every student. We envision every student feeling connected to the people at their school and finding their school a safe and empowering place to grow. We envision every student finding support at home, at school and in their community for their academic success, their physical health, their emotional growth and their healthy relationships. We envision that when a student is struggling with a mental health challenge, the student and their family will find caring partners with the expertise and resources to help. With the support they need to thrive, students will be able to navigate through hardships – whether academic, physical, social or emotional – overcome the challenges to their thriving, and move successfully along the path toward healthy and successful adulthood.



Spotlight No. 1

OC students serving and thriving: Meet Jasmine Chhabria and Rebekah Robeck

Jasmine Chhabria and Rebekah Robeck were both in eighth grade when they found a way to use their gifts to serve and thrive. Jasmine was a student in the Irvine Unified School District. She created a one-woman performance for National History Day based on the Mendez v. Westminster case that in 1947 brought an end to legal school segregation in California and laid the groundwork for the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954. In Jasmine's performance, she played the girl at the center of the case, Sylvia Mendez, as well as Sylvia's mother, Felicitas, and Judge Paul McCormick, who presided in the case. Jasmine's performance won first place in the Orange County and California National History Day competitions, and she finished in the top five in the national event. Jasmine built on that experience by becoming deeply involved in the creation of the Mendez Freedom Trail and Tribute Monument Park project with the City of Westminster and OCDE. In 2022, she won a National Philanthropy Day Outstanding

Youth award for her contribution to civic learning in the Orange County community.

In the same year Jasmine created her one-woman show, Rebekah Robeck was an eighth-grader in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District. She had recently returned to California after three years with her family in El Salvador. She didn't feel very connected at her new middle school, so she decided to do something to bring her school community closer. Her idea, supported by her parents and the school, involved passing out pizza slices and distributing T-shirts that read, "Let's Be Kind." Pretty soon, lots of students started wearing the shirts regularly, making it cool to be kind. From her middle school, she helped spread the activity to schools across the district, and now about 20 OC schools participate in Let's Be Kind Day. Both Jasmine and Rebekah are currently attending universities, where they continue to serve and thrive.





Challenges students face on the road to thriving

Even with all the successes Orange County students have achieved, we recognize that students now face unprecedented challenges.

Imagine what it is like to be growing up in the early 2020s. On one hand, students in Orange County are coming of age in a society with extraordinary resources and opportunities. Technology has put all the information in the world at students' fingertips, providing accessibility beyond what any previous generation has experienced.

On the other hand, children and youth in Orange County today have faced challenges that can seem overwhelming: a global pandemic, periods of disrupted schooling, economic uncertainty and family instability for many, climate-related threats and disasters, and social anxieties partially fueled by damaging social media practices. Is it surprising, then, given the environment in which students are growing up, that many are struggling with anxiety, depression and feelings of disconnectedness and even hopelessness?

Many research studies document these challenges. Several key data points suffice to illustrate.

Even before the COVID pandemic and related stresses, a Conditions of Children in Orange County report released in 2022 notes that in the years 2017 through 2019, 24.6 percent of seventh-graders, 30.2 percent of ninth-graders and 34.6 percent of 11th-graders in the county reported experiencing depression-related feelings in the previous year. These proportions are higher compared to 2011 through 2013. The report also notes that the combined hospitalization rate for serious mental illness and substance use conditions for children increased by 42 percent, from a low of 21.7 per 10,000 children in 2011 to 30.8 per 10,000 children in 2020.

Challenge Success, a non-profit related to the Stanford University Graduate School of Education, has surveyed more than 250,000 middle and high school students nationwide and reports that 95 percent are sleep deprived, 77 percent experience stress-related

In 2021, the United States Department of Education reported on early impacts of the pandemic on student mental health.

- Emergency department visits related to mental health increased 24 percent for 5-to-11-year-olds and 31 percent for 12-to-17-year-olds between January and October 2020 (Leeb et al., 2020).
- Between March and June of 2020, more than 25 percent of American parents reported that their children experienced declines in mental health, and 14 percent reported increases in behavior problems (Patrick et al., 2020).
- In a survey conducted in April and May 2020, 1 in 4 youth ages 13 to 19 reported an increase in sleep loss due to worry, feeling unhappy or depressed, feeling constantly under strain, and loss of confidence in themselves (Margolius et al., 2020).
- A U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report found one quarter of respondents ages 18 to 24 had contemplated suicide in the 30 days prior to completing the survey (Czeisler et al., 2020).

health symptoms, 63 percent are constantly worried about academics, and 47 percent are disengaged or simply "doing school."

A 2022 Kaiser Family Foundation/CNN poll of American adults conducted during the latter part of the COVID-19 pandemic found that 96 percent of adults surveyed characterized mental health among children and teenagers as a crisis or a problem. Only 3 percent said mental health was not a problem for children and teenagers. In the same poll, respondents were asked who should play a role in addressing mental health problems. Sixty-four percent said schools should play a major role, 31 percent said schools should play a minor role, and only 4 percent said schools should play no role at all. Respondents put schools (95 percent) third on the list of who should play a major or minor role, just behind individuals and families (98 percent) and family doctors and other health care providers (98 percent). Employers (90 percent) and churches and other religious organizations (85 percent) were also frequently mentioned as playing a role in addressing mental health problems.

In short, more students than ever before report feeling disconnected, depressed and hopeless. For some students, the social anxiety can be limiting. For others, trauma related to adverse childhood experiences can be debilitating. For too many, challenges related to mental health can lead to addiction or other self-injurious behavior. These in turn can profoundly undermine the fulfillment of students' real potential.

In the next section, we describe how schools in Orange County are working with students, families and community members to help children and youth thrive in the midst of these challenges. Students need to know that they are not alone and they do not have to endure these challenges by themselves. Nor are their families alone. They are part of larger communities that can work together to support their children, with schools playing a key role.

We have great hope that by working together we can and will equip students to meet their challenges, to overcome, to thrive and to succeed in education, career and life.



Supports that empower students to thrive

What can we do together to make sure students are able to navigate the challenges they face and thrive during difficult times? In recent years, Orange County educators and schools have partnered with families and communities in new and powerful ways to significantly increase supports for students to enhance their academic, emotional, social and behavioral growth. All the dimensions of a child's life are important, and a child thrives when all these dimensions are valued, integrated and supported.

Valuing each child means providing supports and learning opportunities corresponding to the needs of each child. Some of these supports and learning opportunities are universal, meaning they are relevant to every student. Some are specific to a smaller number of students who might need supplemental support in a particular area of their development. Some supports are for a few students who need individualized assistance in a particular area of their development. This framework is sometimes referred to as a "system of support," and these

supports are offered at various levels – or tiers – of need, as described above. This structure is therefore described as a multi-tiered system of support. See "Spotlight No. 2" below for how this looks at two Orange County schools.

Educators begin with supports that are universal, for all children and youth. This begins with creating school environments that are welcoming, inviting and affirming for every student. What does it feel like to walk on a campus? What is the reception like when you walk into the office area? Do the grounds look well kept? Each one of us values a warm welcome, and we are at our best when we feel like people see us and want us to be there. This generally welcoming environment extends to the classroom. Teachers often welcome each student at the door, greeting students by name to affirm that they are seen and are part of their classroom community. The classroom itself is inviting and space is used in a way that encourages interaction and collaboration. Students have a chance to interact with one another and with the

teacher, sometimes during a "circle time" that brings students together to discuss topics that are important to them, including how they are feeling and what they are thinking about that day. This gathering helps students get set to learn.

Teachers and other support staff encourage sharing and equip students with tools for expressing their thoughts and for listening respectfully to the thoughts of others. Teachers equip students with tools to manage their emotions and strategies for self-awareness and self-management. They teach students how to recognize the emotions of others and how to constructively build friendships and manage relationships. Teachers help students grow in their capacity to make responsible decisions and become people of kindness, character and compassion.

Teachers and students establish predictable routines and procedures in the classroom, agreements about how we treat one another and how we engage in our learning and work. These routines and procedures are taught so that students have the predictability and feel the security of knowing what is expected. Teachers consciously value the interests, experiences and knowledge that each student brings to the classroom community. Students are taught to value one another's experiences and perspectives.

Learning opportunities in the classroom are rich and powerful. Instruction is well planned and informed by the best strategies for teaching and learning, providing multiple modes of engagement for students, multiple ways of representing ideas and multiple avenues for student action and expression. This way of engaging students by offering a variety of approaches to learning and expression is sometimes referred to as a "universal design for learning."

Families and community partners are a vital part of the universal strategies that help all students to thrive. In addition, giving students opportunities to participate in artistic expression, physical and athletic activity, community service, and cultural and civic engagement all enhance learning and emotional and social health. Career readiness activities are important ways to give students a sense of being prepared for their future. Every opportunity to connect, to be part of a caring community, and to accelerate their learning will help a student to thrive within a thriving classroom in a thriving school.



Throughout this process, teachers are working together in groups, using data to inform their instructional decisions and taking a strengths-based approach to their students.

These universal (or "Tier 1") supports benefit all students. Yet some students need supplemental supports at particular times in particular areas of their development. Some of the supports for thriving that are available to students who need additional assistance include focused support

for those who are experiencing emotional, social or behavioral challenges. This might include more frequent opportunities to connect with educators and other students in small groups, greater affirmation of their interests (and more opportunities to explore those interests), or enhanced coaching and feedback on particular areas of development and growth.

Depending on students' needs, teachers might be able to draw on the expertise of specialists to help a student or a group of students in a particular developmental area. For academic needs, these supports might include tutoring or focused instruction in an area of need. For behavioral needs, students might participate in "Check in/Check out," a daily activity in which students receive feedback on their behavior at particular times throughout the day. In the morning, they "check in" with a staff member and then receive periodic feedback throughout the day from their teacher(s). At the end of the day, they "check out" with the staff member from the morning check-in. For students who need

support with relationships or emotions, a "Check and Connect" activity might involve connecting a student with a mentor who can regularly check in and give the student a stronger sense of connection. Some supplemental ("Tier 2") supports might include the whole class if the teacher determines that the whole class might benefit, or a small group if several students share the same need for supplemental support.

All of these supports are intended to help students thrive. Positive mental health – this encompasses emotions, social interactions and behavior – is key to thriving. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021): "Like physical health, positive mental health promotes success in life. As defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 'Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence

through adulthood (p.1).'" The U.S. Department of Education (2021) estimates that with universal supports and supplemental supports as described above, about 95 percent of students will have the support they need at school to thrive (p. 25).

Because some students' needs are not met adequately through universal and supplemental supports, a smaller number of students will require more individualized support in order to thrive. When this is the case, school teams can work with families to identify the student's specific strengths and areas of need to inform the development of an individualized plan. This plan can be used to strengthen the student's development academically, emotionally, socially or behaviorally, improving their short- and long-term ability to thrive. As with supports in the other tiers, educators draw on family input and assessment data to inform them about the student's needs and the potential effectiveness of various kinds of support and learning. Typically, this is done by a "student-centered team"

that includes educators, family members and specialists, like a school psychologist, school counselor, behavioral coach or other school-based support person, along with the student. The plan developed by this team will be the basis of the supports and opportunities offered to the student. With this plan in place, educators, family members, the support team and the student can monitor growth to see whether adjustments are needed. Schools, families and students might also be able to tap into the resources offered by community partners, some of which are described in the next section.

Meanwhile, students receiving individualized ("Tier 3") support need to continue to have access to the universal and supplemental supports and opportunities described above so they continue to be full participants with their peers and teachers in the learning and growth process. Together, universal, supplemental and individualized supports give each and every student the opportunity to thrive.





Spotlight No. 2

Support system in action in Orange County schools

In 2017, EdSource published a column from Orange County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Al Mijares about early implementation of a system of support at two Orange County secondary schools. Here's an excerpt:

With the benefit of a modified schedule, Fountain Valley (High School)'s teachers gather throughout the year by grade level to discuss what's working in and out of the classroom, and what might be causing academic and behavioral problems. These sessions give staff an opportunity to identify students who are struggling and would benefit from additional

interventions, which may include tutoring, counseling or even an after-school club.

Fountain Valley's tiered interventions are determined in part by hard data and collaboration, but that's not the whole story. They're also driven by meaningful interactions between students and teachers, who have underscored the importance of establishing personal connections by promoting a simple question – "What's Your Story?" – as a campus-wide theme.

About 15 miles away, South Junior High School in Anaheim is building a similar framework. If a

student starts to drift off course academically or behaviorally, a team that includes counselors, administrators, the school's psychologist and other educators will meet to discuss possible solutions. Interventions can include additional classroom support, one-on-one mentoring, home visits or even a referral to an outside organization like Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County. The idea is that each student will receive an approach that's based on his or her unique needs.

"It's not just meeting about content," South Principal Enrique Romero says. "It's meeting about kids."

One of the challenges for any secondary school is that students report to multiple teachers, which makes it more difficult to collaborate or spot emerging trends. Recognizing this, South this year is piloting a new seventh-grade program in which four teachers in the core subjects of English, math, science and history essentially share the same set of students. The school has also created a new position – family and community engagement specialist – to help parents become more involved on campus and to help them learn to advocate for their children.



The power of partnerships to promote student thriving

Families and communities are key partners with schools in meeting the needs of the whole child, equipping students with critical life skills, and empowering them to thrive. Examples of these kinds of partnerships were abundant during the COVID-19 pandemic when, for example, communities of faith supported families with grocery distribution and districts opened school meal programs to every student (Hanigan, 2020).

Employers, like those participating in the OC Pathways consortium, are also key partners in promoting student thriving as they provide critical support for the growth of “21st century competencies,” or life skills, like communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, compassion, civic engagement and character.

Likewise, the state of California has invested significant resources in supporting greater coordination between school systems and health systems to meet the physical and mental health needs of students. This is particularly important for students in need of supplemental and individualized support.

In Orange County, collaboration among OCDE, local school districts, county health agencies and health providers has been particularly strong and continues to gain momentum. “Spotlight No. 3” describes the kinds of expanded supports now available to students in Orange County schools.

Among the supports made available to schools through OCDE and its community partners are programs like the Student Advocates for Mental Health initiative, supported by the Orange County Health Care Agency with funding from the Mental Health Services Act. This initiative equips students to “raise mental health awareness and reduce stigmas at their schools through peer-influencer campaigns, workshops, activities and an annual video contest. To date, about three dozen schools are participating from 18 school districts (Hanigan, 2021).” “Spotlight No. 4” illustrates the power of these programs.

Coordination of efforts across the county has been enhanced through collaboration among OCDE, school districts and health agency partners. “With funding from the Mental Health Student Services Act, and in partnership with

the Orange County Health Care Agency and local school districts, OCDE has hired seven regional mental health coordinators, creating a countywide network to strengthen mental health procedures and protocols (Hanigan, 2021).”

Moreover, “OCDE staff have developed many resources and trainings for school employees and families who have experienced pandemic-related trauma, including workshops on how parents can support their children in times of crisis and when they may need additional services and support. Workshops are typically offered through OCDE’s Learning Supports unit and the department’s Student Achievement and Wellness unit. Trainings also include self-care for educators, recognizing that thriving teachers can more effectively empower thriving students (Hanigan, 2021).”

Over the past two years, Orange County schools have greatly expanded the number of school counselors, school psychologists and other clinicians available to support students. The need for this increase is evident in that school counselors were often serving 500 to 750 students each, compared to the 250:1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.

Orange County education leaders and health leaders meet regularly to plan and implement systems that use funds provided by state and federal governments to support student thriving. These sources of funding and the various agencies that allocate them have historically been siloed, but now Orange County is taking a collaborative approach so that all children and young people may thrive. Examples of partners in this process are the Orange County Health Care Agency, CalOptima, Children’s Hospital of Orange County (CHOC) and the Be Well OC consortium, along with participants from faith communities, service organizations, parent and family groups, and the business community. The California National Guard has partnered with the Orange County Department of Education to support students through the Sunburst Youth Challenge Academy, as described in “Spotlight No. 5.”

Community schools are another example of districts pulling together the resources from the community to support student and family thriving. “The model encourages campuses to partner with families, community organizations, health care providers and social services agencies to put in place wraparound supports for young learners (Nguyen, 2022).”

A young boy with light brown hair, wearing a blue and white striped shirt, is sitting at a desk in a classroom. He is looking intently at a computer monitor. The monitor displays a complex flowchart with various colored boxes and arrows. In the background, a teacher in a blue shirt is standing near another computer monitor, and other students are partially visible. The classroom has blue walls and a clock.

Spotlight No. 3

School districts expanding resources to support student thriving

In August 2022, the OCDE Newsroom highlighted an example of a district expanding resources to support student thriving (Gray, 2022). Here's an excerpt:

With rates of mental health issues increasing rapidly during the pandemic, adding resources to meet students' social, emotional and behavioral needs has become an even greater priority for school officials – including those in the Brea Olinda Unified School District.

As reported by Good Day LA, Brea Olinda educators have seen a shift in students' behavioral and emotional patterns in the classroom. School psychologist Rachel Miller told Good Day LA that more students are withdrawing and isolating themselves from others because of their uncertainty over how to act in social situations.

In response, the district has begun assigning school psychologists and counselors to each school site to help

students adjust and let them know they are not alone.

"The great thing about doing the social-emotional lessons every month is that we're able to go inside the classrooms and let them know that it's OK if you're feeling stressed out and your feelings are valid," district counselor Erika Rodriguez told Good Day LA.

The district has also created an online wellness center for students to access additional support and resources not available on campus, Good Day LA reported.

Superintendent Brinda Leon expressed the importance of being able to provide these services, now more than ever.

"I always look for those silver linings in the pandemic and I feel the silver lining of being able to focus on mental health is a gift – it's a gift to society and it's our gift to our kids," said Leon.



In October 2022, the OCDE Newsroom shared the story of a powerful program at Santiago High School in the Garden Grove Unified School District (Nguyen, 2022). Here's an excerpt:

A health teacher from Santiago High School received a surprise visit from her students, family and representatives from the Orange County Department of Education as they presented her with the 2022 Linda Kearns Community Prevention Award.

The Orange County Substance Abuse Prevention Network commended Shannon Bennett for her leadership in the area of drug and alcohol prevention. She is credited for building one of the strongest and most consistent Friday Night Live Clubs, or FNL, in Orange County, spearheading powerful efforts that engage young people in substance abuse prevention initiatives.

"A key reason for the club's success is Shannon's supportive presence and genuine interest in her students' well-

being," said OCDE Prevention Education Coordinator Stephan Lambert. "For many students, she is their trusted adult, ally and mentor – a strong protective factor against substance use and other risk behaviors."

In addition to her leadership with FNL, Bennett also serves as her high school's Tobacco-Use Prevention Education lead, in which she organizes parent education events and maintains strong community partnerships to support her students.

"Shannon is an amazing representation of how deeply GGUSD educators care for students and how much time and talent they invest in advocating for the best interests of their students," said GGUSD Board of Education trustee Walter Muneton.

The Orange County Substance Abuse Prevention Network established this award in 2006 to honor educators like Linda Kearns, who dedicated 30 years of work in the field of youth alcohol, tobacco, drugs, violence, HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy prevention.

Spotlight No. 4

Partnerships to prevent substance abuse



Spotlight No. 5

Partnerships support student thriving

Sunburst cadets take a break from academic and physical challenges in the academy's new WellSpace.

The Sunburst Youth Challenge Academy is a partnership between the California National Guard and the Orange County Department of Education that provides deep support to students from across Orange County. Students participate in a high-quality, six-month academy located on the Los Alamitos Joint Forces Training Base. Yet this is not a military school; it is a public school that draws on the strengths of the National Guard and Orange County educators.

Students who participate in Sunburst Academy have faced very serious challenges to their thriving. Many have fallen behind in credits toward graduation and others have encountered

some of the very significant issues that keep teenagers in this society from succeeding in school and life.

When their families help them apply to Sunburst, students are looking for a turnaround in their lives. That turnaround is made possible through a combination of physical challenges and disciplines, highly structured and supportive academic experiences, and attention to emotional and psychological issues that are common during the teen years. During this six-month program, students in a cohort often experience dramatic changes in their lives, transforming from unhealthy to fit, from

undisciplined to on-task, and from unmotivated to purposeful. Their grades also rise, on average, between one and two grade-point levels during their time in the program. A Sunburst graduation is a celebration of thriving.

One of the resources available to students at Sunburst Academy is a WellSpace, a room that provides a welcoming, calming environment for students when they are having a tough day. This is a military base, so you might imagine a sterile room with stark walls that send the message, "Get it together. There's no crying at Sunburst." But that's not what this space says. This is a human space with art on the walls, comfortable

chairs, real wood in the furniture, art materials, green plants and musical instruments available for students to play if that helps bring calm on a stressful day.

A student can come to this room with a staff member to talk or join a small group of fellow students to decompress. Sunburst is far from a pressure-free environment. When students are running five miles or taking a geometry test, they feel pressure. But there is no pressure in the WellSpace. In this environment, students are learning to relieve stress and regroup – skills that will help them successfully navigate challenges throughout their lives.

Call to action: Becoming a community where every student can thrive

Over the past several months, Orange County superintendents, educators, family members, students and community partners have weighed in on what strategic priorities should be the focus of school efforts to enhance student thriving over the next two to three years. The following priorities have risen to the top of the list. They are all strategically important and not listed in order of priority. Together, they constitute a call to action for making Orange County a community where every student is able to thrive.



Strategic priorities

What are some key actions we can take together to assure that our students can thrive? The following strategic priorities should be considered.



Deepen our commitment to thriving schools, thriving families, thriving communities and thriving students.



Each of us needs a team. Life is full of beauty and opportunity, but it is also fraught with complications. We are not built to do life alone. That is especially true of children or young people. Sergio needs “Team Sergio.” Bella needs “Team Bella.” Jasmine needs “Team Jasmine.” Michael needs “Team Michael.” That team begins with family and extends into supportive communities. Schools can be part of that support team for every student. We must ensure that every school is a welcoming, supportive, thriving environment where students feel connected. When we talk about “systems,” we can conjure images of cold, bureaucratic processes. A system is only valuable if it yields supports and opportunities for people – supports and opportunities that wouldn’t otherwise be available to them. Only when the people responsible for systems are committed to the thriving of every person who is touched by that system can it contribute to the overall thriving of students, schools, families and communities. In that sense, when we talk about effective systems, we are talking about collaborative communities that are greater than the sum of their parts, with schools, districts and other organizations working together to accomplish more than they could on their own. That singular focus on every person thriving is foundational to all our other priorities.

2

Strengthen collaboration and communication among students, families, schools, districts, organizations, agencies and support teams focused on student thriving.

Orange County is in many ways a model for collaboration across systems and sectors to get positive things done. A shared commitment to student health and thriving is one of the key areas for collaboration. Still, efforts in the past have often been siloed in separate agencies and sectors, resulting in redundancy and inefficiency. As discussed earlier, collaboration at the executive level among educational leaders and agency leaders has grown tremendously in recent years so that a more robust, integrated support system for students is now possible. Still, much remains to be done to strengthen that collaboration down through the organizations and systems to the point where the actual services are provided.

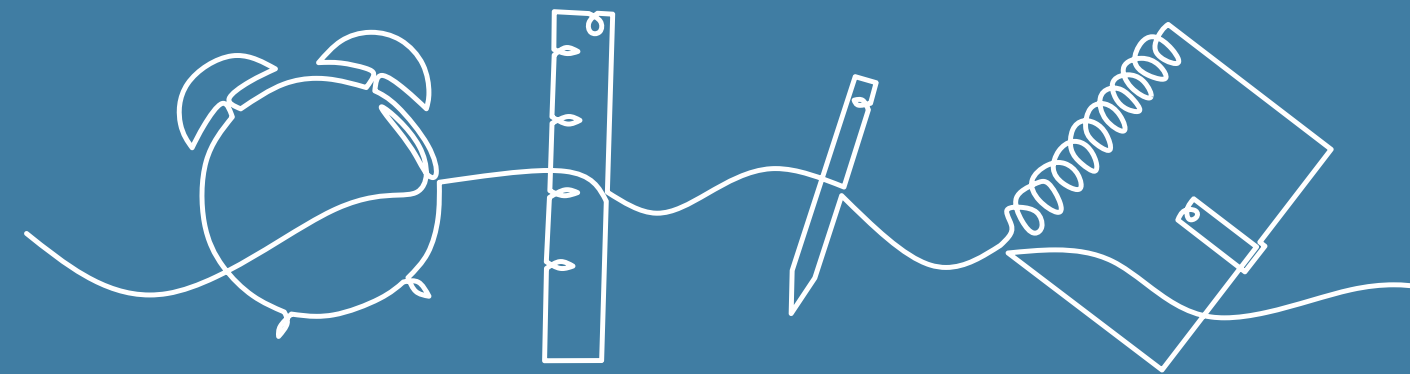
Effective, continuous, clear and inclusive communication is a key part of growing collaboration. When people feel left out of the conversation, they are less likely to feel like their needs are being met. Districts have been increasing their communication with families and students in forums where participants can express their priorities and help envision what kinds of supports and opportunities will be most helpful. When students and families have a voice in the process, they will be much more likely to support the outcomes. Likewise, teachers and other support providers need to be regular participants in conversations about processes and practices, since they are typically at the forefront of serving students and helping them thrive.

More effective collaboration will also facilitate effective strategies for substance abuse prevention and intervention and, on a practical level, help optimize response time when students are experiencing a mental health crisis and facilitate student re-entry when they return to school.

3

Advocate for consistent, long-term funding to support student thriving.

The state of California and the federal government have committed significant funding to support student mental health in recent years, allowing Orange County districts and schools to do more to support student thriving. However, much of that funding is in the form of one-time or short-term allocations. Short-term funding makes it difficult to hire key personnel like school counselors, school psychologists and school social workers with long-term goals in mind, since a “funding cliff” could result in having to lay those professionals off in the near future. OCDE, school districts and community organizations can work together with families and students to advocate that this one-time and short-term funding turn into consistent investments to support student thriving.



4

Work with Orange County and Southern California colleges and universities to increase the number of candidates entering fields related to student thriving.

Even when funding is available, Orange County school districts have been challenged to find professionals in school counseling, school psychology, school social work and even nurses, teachers and other professionals charged with supporting student thriving. Strengthening collaboration with colleges and universities in the county and region can help increase the pipeline of candidates in those fields. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (2021) suggests: "An important strategy is to map local community colleges and four-year colleges and universities to explore connections for college students to work in schools. For example, students in associates and undergraduate programs can be placed in externships in schools to assist in Tier 1 and Tier 2 programming, and those in mental health graduate programs can work in externships focused on involvement across tiers, and involvement in Tier 3 intervention under supervision. Such arrangements represent a 'win-win,' giving students training experience, and helping schools expand their workforce capacity."



5

Increase support for teachers and other school-based professionals through professional learning and other support for their work and for their own thriving.

Teachers and other school-based professionals (administrators, counselors, paraeducators, coaches, family-community liaisons, etc.) carry much of the weight of responding to student and family needs. Districts have greatly enhanced the number of support personnel sharing that responsibility with teachers in recent years, but the load remains heavy. If a student is experiencing trauma, depression or a crisis, the first person to recognize that and respond is often the classroom teacher. Professional learning helps equip teachers with the knowledge and strategies they need to create a caring community that will empower students in their classroom to thrive. Paraeducators also need that professional learning. Administrators carry a very heavy load and need supports and strategies to navigate through challenging times. Professional learning should include strategies for how to respond to students who are experiencing significant trauma or a mental health crisis.

Our humanity and our personal thriving are at the foundation of any capacity we have to support others. The humanity of our school-based professionals, and of the support teams who work with them, must be a priority if we are to empower students and families to thrive.

6

Continue to identify and implement strategies that enhance student thriving and expand opportunities for all.

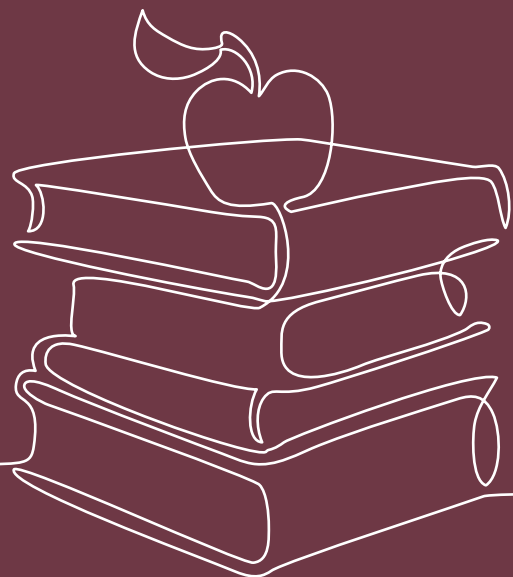
School districts and partners have been expanding supports and opportunities for students in many ways. Schools have increased opportunities for physical activity and health-oriented programs. Campuses are creating WellSpaces to give students a place to regroup when they are feeling overwhelmed. Schools are expanding art and music programs and enhancing opportunities for work-based learning in areas of career interest. Schools are teaching students strategies for “digital literacy” so they can recognize and reject manipulative, untruthful and destructive information from social media and other electronic sources. Schools are creating classroom environments in which students are able to express themselves, learn to manage their emotions, learn to listen to the perspectives of others, and make responsible decisions. Schools are providing more access to counseling resources and offering greater supports for families from community partners. These are just a few of the growing number of strategies and innovations meant to support student thriving.

How well are these strategies working? Which ones work best in which circumstances with which students and families? Implementing innovative strategies and reflecting together on the results of those strategies will allow us to continue to refine, improve and expand our supports for students and their families to move toward a future where all students are thriving.

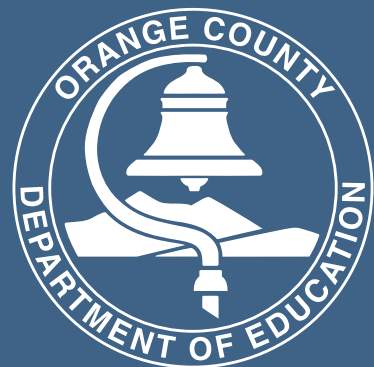


Key performance indicators

How will we know that we are progressing toward greater student thriving? The following key performance indicators can help us track our progress.



1. Surveys of and ongoing conversations with students and families show that schools and community partners are offering supports and opportunities that are helping them to thrive. Responses should indicate which supports and opportunities are most effective.
2. Student success indicators show that more students are thriving and succeeding in school. Examples include credits earned, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic performance data, career pathway completion, college attendance and success data, and numbers of students earning state seals in civic engagement and biliteracy.
3. Surveys of students show an increase in their sense of belonging, their sense of safety, their sense of well-being, and other positive indicators of improved mental health.
4. Student behavioral data indicate that more students are managing their behavior more effectively and fewer are experiencing behavioral crises that result in suspensions, expulsions and other negative consequences.
5. Student mental health data indicate an increase and improvement of services to students and a decrease over time in student mental health crises.
6. Funding for student thriving, specifically in the area of mental health, remains strong and transitions into consistent and long-term investments.
7. The number of school counselors, school psychologists and other school-based personnel hired and retained continues to increase and remains strong.
8. Surveys of teachers and other educators indicate increasing confidence in their capacity to address student needs and support student thriving based on professional learning and other support they receive.
9. Surveys of district leaders indicate that collaborations with community partners continue to improve in their effectiveness in supporting student and family thriving.



The Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) serves some of Orange County's most vulnerable student populations and provides support and mandated fiscal oversight to 28 school districts serving more than 600 schools and approximately 450,000 students.

In addition to providing direct instruction to students through its own alternative and special education programs, OCDE administers an array of programs and services that are critical to the operations of local school districts and community colleges, facilitating professional development, legal guidance, payroll, career and technical education support, high-speed internet access, Local Control and Accountability Plan assistance and approval, resources for families, and student enrichment.

OCDE NEWSROOM

EDUCATION NEWS FROM ORANGE COUNTY AND BEYOND

The OCDE Newsroom is a place for news and information about OCDE, Orange County schools and state education policies. Serving an audience that includes educators, families, students, district staff and community members, the Newsroom is updated daily at newsroom.ocde.us.

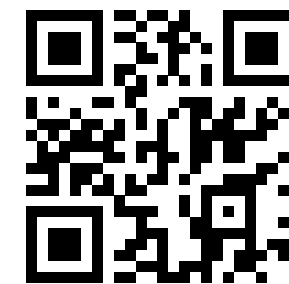
Sign up for a weekly Inbox Edition at link.ocde.us/subscribe-to-newsroom

For additional information about support for children and young people, contact your local school or school district. You can find district website links and contact information on the OCDE website:



ocde.us/SchoolDistricts

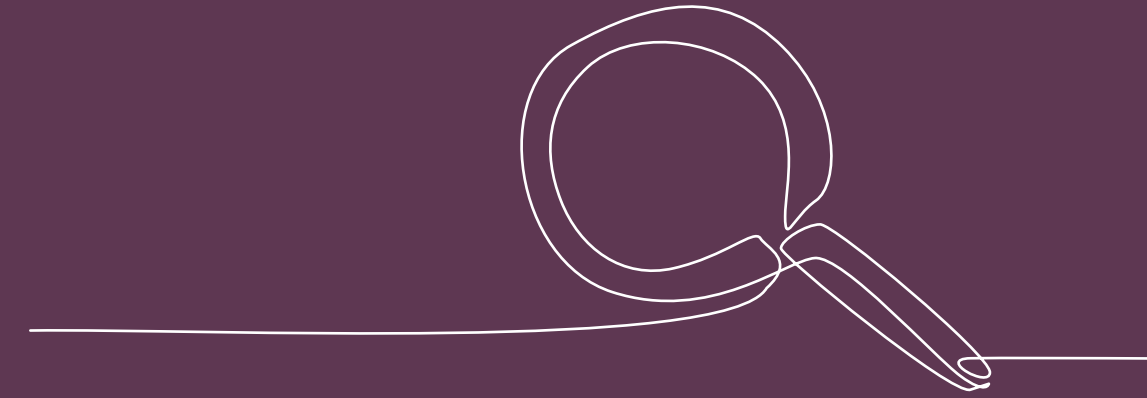
For county-wide support services for students and families, you can find information on the OC Navigator website:



OCnavigator.org

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the families, teachers, school staff, students and community members who made invaluable contributions to this document. We are deeply grateful for your unwavering commitment to nurturing and empowering every child and young person in Orange County, and for your tireless efforts to help them thrive.

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References



Interviews and acknowledgements



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Students

Orange County Youth Council

Families

Parent Focus Group

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School district endorsements



