

Sweetwater Union High School District



27
schools

34,800+
students

Mission

Located in the heart of an international border community, the Sweetwater Union High School District ensures a safe, inclusive, collaborative culture that empowers each student to actively engage in a meaningful educational experience to pursue personal and academic success.

Background

Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) in Chula Vista, CA is the second largest secondary school district in the state. It serves 34,862 students at 27 schools, including 12 high schools, 11 middle schools and alternative and adult education sites. The Sweetwater UHSD student population is socio-economically diverse, with the percentage of students qualifying for Free and Reduced Price Meals (FRPM) ranging from 21% at East Lake High to 90% at Palomar High.¹

¹ CDE Dataquest, 2025-26

Interviews

This profile is based on interviews with:

Ana Maria Alvarez, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning

Nashely Veronica-Mata, Community Schools Program Manager

Jose Luis Vargas, Principal, National City Middle School

Strategies for Coherence

Sweetwater UHSD has invested considerable time and effort to strengthen coherence across its many initiatives, using strategies at the district level as well as with school site teams to help people align their work. Among the many coherence efforts in the district, this profile focuses on the district's work in:



Focused Priorities

- (1) Unifying Cabinet leadership around a whole child approach
- (2) Gathering input from interest-holders to define priorities around whole child practices



Capacity Building

- (3) Using a districtwide Community of Practice to train staff and align initiatives at schools

The district has committed significant time and effort to communicating clearly and co-creating its vision and actions towards coherence. Like all districts, its coherence efforts are a work in progress, constantly shifting to address new conditions in the landscape.



1. Unifying Cabinet leadership around a whole child approach

This looks like...

- Aligning Cabinet leadership around a shared vision for whole child supports
- Using the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) process to spark conversations about strategy and funding
- Organizing data to support decision-making

The Sweetwater UHSD leadership started looking at alignment across its departments and initiatives about ten years ago, when the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the LCAP and Differentiated Assistance (DA) were being implemented. Along with the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents for finance and operations, the Cabinet leadership includes three Assistant Superintendents focused on different aspects of instruction - Teaching and Learning, Research and Evaluation, and Equity and Student Supports. When faced with Dashboard findings and DA eligibility around disproportionate suspensions, the three Cabinet members on instruction recognized that these findings could not be addressed piecemeal. Rather, the **Cabinet needed to align their work to address students' needs holistically**. Grounded in Michael Fullan's work, they started to design strategies across the district that built coherence around a common whole child approach. When the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) grants became available, the district received funding for eight high schools and four middle schools. With their commitment to districtwide whole child supports, the three Assistant Superintendents immediately saw the opportunity to expand and sustain the Community Schools approach beyond the funded schools to every school in the district.

The **LCAP has been a useful tool to unify the full Cabinet around a whole child approach**. It has sparked conversations about areas of the SUHSD LCAP that need to be strengthened, particularly around shared strategies across strands of work. For example, LCAP Goal 2 reads: "Create a safe and healthy learning environment for each student by building a culture of equity and a positive climate that promotes excellence throughout the district." The actions under Goal 2 describe how the district is leveraging initiatives together - Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), social-emotional learning (SEL), Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO), mental health, and academic support - to create the environments and culture in which students can learn. With strategies clearly articulated and aligned, the Cabinet has

been able to identify opportunities to braid funding from LCFF, Title 1 and other initiatives.

The Cabinet has also created its own **comprehensive district data dashboard** to support its decision-making. In addition to the LCAP indicators, Sweetwater's dashboard includes enrollment by groups, grade level, English proficiency, and demographics as well as perception data from students from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), SEL, suspension rates, chronic absenteeism, and other data points beyond the state's dashboard. Eventually, this customized dashboard will include district, school and student-level data all in one place so that leadership, staff, families and partners are informed about the district's strengths, areas for improvement and progress.

2. Gathering input from interest-holders to define priorities around whole child practices

This looks like...

- Recognizing the importance of clear language, including a shared definition of “whole child”
- Collecting information from interest-holders by tapping into their hopes and dreams for their schools

In 2024, the Community Schools team from Sweetwater UHSD attended a workshop at the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) presented by the Center for Whole Child Education, based on the report [Strengthening Coherence Across California: A Whole Child Lens](#). The team was excited about the report's key takeaway - that whole child practices are woven through all of California's initiatives - and recognized the opportunity to strengthen their district's existing focus on whole child supports. They also **recognized that their district needed to clarify its language**, including having a shared definition of “whole child.”

They decided to collect perspectives from interest-holders with the ultimate goal of having whole child practices defined and integrated into the LCAP. They included a wide range of people - students, staff, and families - and **asked questions that tapped into their hopes and dreams for their schools**. Sixteen thousand people responded to these questions:

- What does your dream school look like?
- What do you love most about your school?
- What are your hopes for your school?

They were also asked to state their priorities for education from among five goals:

- Student well-being
- Academic success
- College and career readiness
- Expanded/enriched learning opportunities
- Family/community engagement

A steering committee used this data to create a whole child graphic organizer that describes the community's priorities for whole child education, with a north star based on this information in development.

Capacity Building



3. Using a districtwide Community of Practice to train staff and align initiatives at schools

This looks like...

- Bringing people from different initiatives together to understand each other's work
- Ensuring shared understanding of whole child practices
- Finding points of integration and alignment in existing structures
- Accessing opportunities for continuous improvement

In September 2025, Sweetwater UHSD launched the first session of a three-session Whole Child Community of Practice (CoP) for teams from different school sites. This was the **first intentional collaboration between Community Schools and MTSS**, and involved teams of three to five members - including site administrators, Community School coordinators, counselors, teachers, MTSS resource teachers, expanded learning coordinators, and community relations facilitators. The goal of the CoP was “to enhance the mindset, skills, and shared leadership practices that allow for the intentional design of school systems that support the whole child.”² They pursued this goal through four essential questions:

1. Are we using common language around “whole child” and “whole child” practices?
2. How are we leveraging the current frameworks of MTSS and Community Schools as anchoring practices?
3. What holistic data can support the needs of the whole child?
4. How do we collaborate with others to design a school system that supports the whole child?

² [Whole Child Community of Practice slide deck](#)

In their first and second sessions, the teams spent time grounding in the science of learning and development, **defining whole child practices**, and discussing the whole child strategies they are already implementing in their roles. They then moved to **finding points of integration and alignment** in their school structures and plans, including:

- Examining the link between whole child practices and their individual School Plans for Student Achievement (SPSA) vision, mission and goals;
- Identifying opportunities for synergy between teaming structures - school site council, instructional leadership team, attendance team, MTSS team, and culture and climate team; and
- Consolidating their school site's many resource maps into one comprehensive resource map.

The various mapping tools can be found in the [first session slide deck](#).

In their conversations, the group agreed upon a shared priority for the school year: promoting student well-being. Their first session ended with site teams identifying the various professional learning opportunities being offered in support of student well-being and whole child practices. In the second session, non-CCSPP-funded school sites and their MTSS partners were invited to join the conversation, and continued the work of resource mapping. The third session was a culminating event in which 19 schools from across the district showcased one practice in support of the whole child, answered questions and gathered suggestions. The [slide deck from the culminating event](#) describes the practices that were showcased.

Sweetwater's coherence work is an ongoing process. A team of two district staff and two site staff participate in an **improvement community** facilitated by SoCal LINK from the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Their goal is to expand and strengthen the Community Schools CoP by including more staff (especially principals), more sites (beyond the CCSPP-funded sites), and more initiatives (beyond MTSS and Community Schools).

Challenges

Like all school districts, Sweetwater UHSD always has a lot going on, and the district is constantly trying to filter, prioritize and translate new information from the state for the schools. While they work hard to focus on the strategies that really work, there are always some mandates that cannot be ignored. These mandates include the multiple reporting and planning documents required by different initiatives. By consolidating information into one dashboard and aligning questions across multiple surveys, they are working to make the flood of information manageable and communication across their sites and systems effective, always toward the ultimate goal of creating positive learning environments for their diverse students.

Impacts

Sweetwater UHSD's focus on whole child practices to create the conditions for student learning has shifted the way district and school leaders see academics. The Community of Practice is a network where school leaders are connecting, building capacity, and seeing the impact of the Community Schools strategy across the district. They have a stronger understanding of the link between whole child practices and academics that has sparked conversations at school sites between principals, Community Schools coordinators and teachers about instructional leadership. At the district level, departments are more interconnected and have started to co-design strategies and actions to advance toward the district vision. More community partners are involved at the district and sites and are excited about resources and the opportunity to contribute.

According to Principal Jose Luis Vargas, the district's clarity and focus allow site leaders to operate with both structure and autonomy. The district sets three priority areas across the district and allows site leaders to choose one area to focus on for their site. The options are learning outcomes, instructional strategies, and assessment for learning. The structured choice creates some consistency across the district - including opportunities for site leaders to share their approach and their learning with each other - while also honoring the fact that school leaders need the flexibility to respond to their school communities' specific needs.