

# executive summary

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## **REDWOOD CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING PROGRAM: YEAR 1 IMPLEMENTATION STUDY**

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Redwood City School District (RCSD) has a long history of attending to the needs of its students and their families, and it has responded to the current incidence of mental health challenges among youth by setting a goal that by June 2024, every student will receive “appropriate social-emotional supports designed to meet their needs.”<sup>1</sup> The plan for achieving this goal includes placing a full-time, district-employed, licensed clinical mental health counselor in each of its twelve schools for the 2021–22 and 2022–23 academic years, and dedicating a portion of one counseling position to the role of “lead counselor” responsible for overseeing program design, development, and implementation. The mental health counseling program is part of a broader initiative known as the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), a comprehensive framework for creating a coordinated system of supports that promotes students’ academic, behavioral, and social-emotional growth and development.

### **ABOUT THIS STUDY**

This implementation study, conducted as part of a long-term partnership between Stanford University and RCSD,<sup>2</sup> aims to describe the role and contribution of RCSD’s mental health counselors and identify opportunities for improvement as the program moves into its second year of implementation. With these goals in mind, our study is designed to address three questions:

1. What is the role of RCSD’s school-based mental health counselors?
2. What are early indicators of the counseling program’s strengths and challenges?
3. What conditions help and hinder the work of mental health counselors?

To answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative implementation study from October 2021–May 2022 focusing on data collected via 23 interviews with various program stakeholders; 51 participant observations of meetings related to the counseling program and student services more broadly; and more than 100 district-produced program documents related to MTSS and/or the

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see Redwood City School District’s 2021-2022 Local Control and Accountability Plan, available from the [district website](#).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Stanford Redwood City Sequoia School Mental Health Collaborative, please visit the project overview provided by the [John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities](#) or the [Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing](#).

counseling program. We analyzed the data using a “tri-level lens” to examine how mental health counselors’ activities are directed toward building the capacity of students, schools, and the district.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Our research indicates counselors are investing time in providing direct services to students as well as building school and district capacity to support mental health and wellbeing. Our research brief describes specific strengths, challenges, and conditions that impact program success in greater detail.

Our findings point to several strategic opportunities for strengthening the mental health counseling program and leveraging it to advance the district’s broader capacity to support mental health and wellbeing. While we expand on these opportunities in the research brief and full report, we briefly highlight five strategic opportunities here:

- Secure funding to sustain and expand the program beyond June 2023, inclusive of a full-time lead counselor.
- Develop theory of change and strengthen data systems to measure short-term outcomes related to student mental health and wellbeing, inclusive of attention to strengths, student/family perspectives, and the relationship between wellbeing and student attendance, engagement, and achievement.
- Implement a district-wide Tier 1 strategy focused on building teacher, staff, and family capacity to support student mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Kognito).
- Expand development and implementation of program assets.
- Build capacity to ensure the counseling program effectively supports the district’s most vulnerable students.

After just one year of implementation, evidence suggests RCSD’s mental health counseling program is well utilized in all 12 schools, and early indicators suggest it is providing students with much-needed counseling support. Our data also provide early indicators that the counseling program contributes to school capacity to support mental health and wellbeing and builds district capacity to achieve its goal of providing each student with the support they need to reduce or eliminate the barriers mental health challenges pose to their learning and achievement. As the counseling program matures and efforts are made to ensure it is aligned with, reaching, and effectively supporting the district’s diverse students, the counseling program will be well-positioned to advance district capacity to support positive and equitable student learning, growth, development, and achievement.

*For more information on RCSD’s mental health counseling program, please contact Ana Paula Garay, [agaray@rcsdk8.net](mailto:agaray@rcsdk8.net); for more information on this study, please contact Dr. Kristin Geiser, [kgeiser@stanford.edu](mailto:kgeiser@stanford.edu).*