

We educate the whole child. Challenger Middle School is a public neighborhood school located in the community of Mira Mesa. Its demographic is diverse in socioeconomic levels, cultures, and ethnicity. To educate the whole child, we offer enrichment activities, pursue superior physical fitness, and nutritional standards while maintaining a culture of elevated expectations and rigorous academics through multi-tiered systems of support.

Academic programs address the needs of all learners. Gifted and Talented Education (GATE), Accelerated Math, and high school credit foreign languages are offered yearly. Intervention courses, tutoring, support for English Learners, and Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) meet the needs of our student body.

Enrichment programs approach a broad spectrum of interests including Math, Engineering and Science; award-winning Instrumental Music programs, Consumer and Family Sciences, Mindfulness, Computer Programming, Yearbook, and Associated Student Body. Staff members sponsor after school clubs such as Eco Squad, Sports, Chess, Art, Rubik's Cube, Outdoor Activities, Gay Straight Alliance, Circle of Friends, Dance Team, and Computer Science. Connections with the community are developed through mentor and mentee programs, parent workshops, principal chats, and collaborations with mental health agencies.

We encourage healthy bodies. Our Physical Education (PE) program offers a comprehensive approach to physical fitness. Our students participate in team sports, and cardiovascular and strength oriented workouts. The majority of students score in the healthy fitness zone based on California's Fitnessgram assessment. We are also committed to providing healthy food options to support academic success and promote healthful eating habits leading to positive nutrition practices. The menu follows nutrition guidelines prescribed by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. The Eco Squad grows fresh produce to be prepared and served in school lunches, instituting a Garden to Cafe Program.

Students and staff are instructed in various mental health strategies. Data from California Healthy Kids Surveys and site-generated surveys inform the needs of our students. The areas of stress and anxiety around academics and peer relationships are a consistent need. School stakeholders, including parents, are encouraged to engage in mental health coping strategies including mindfulness practices, mental health awareness, parent education workshops, assemblies, and community circles.

The Challenger Middle School student body presents a model for citizenship. The positive learning environment present on our campus is reflected in student attendance and behavior data. Behavioral problems on site are at a minimum with a suspension rate at less than 3%, in comparison to the district's rate of 16%. In 2017, our attendance rate was 94% in comparison to state rates, which were 91%.

California Department of Education 2019 Distinguished Schools Application Model Programs and Practices

Summary

1. Name of the Model Programs and Practices: **Mental Health Support**
2. How long has this Model Programs and Practices been in place? (select one option) **2–4 years**
3. What is/are the target area(s)? (select at least one area)
 - Education Supports**
 - Parent, Family, and Community Involvement**

California Department of Education 2019 Distinguished Schools Application

4. What are the target populations? (select all that apply) -
 - American Indian/Alaska Native**
 - Asian**
 - Black or African American**
 - Filipino**
 - Hispanic or Latino**
 - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander**
 - White**
 - Two or More Races**
 - Socioeconomically Disadvantaged**
 - English Learners**
 - Students with Disabilities**
5. What strategies are used to implement the Model Programs and Practices? (select all that apply)
 - School Climate**
 - Parent Engagement**
 - Data-Driven Decision Making**
 - Social/Emotional/Behavioral Support**

Model Practice - Mental Health Supports

Description

Challenger Middle School (CMS) strives to meet the academic and socioemotional needs of all students while simultaneously maintaining and restoring well-being, bringing awareness to mental health issues, and destigmatizing the way mental health is perceived. San Diego Unified School District's (SDUSD) LCAP Goal 4 is "Positive School Environment, Climate, and Culture - with Equity at the Core and Support for the Whole Child." Specifically, the goal states that schools provide safe and well-maintained facilities, positive learning climates, and instructional practices that are culturally responsive, challenge bias, and support the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of students. Current district implementation steps are to specifically address the needs of marginalized students.

We tailor Interventions to meet the specific needs of our demographic. CMS differentiates itself from the district's LCAP Goal 4 action steps by providing social and emotional supports to all children with a strong focus on fostering positive mental health awareness, coping strategies, and community partnerships. Our specific interventions and supports address socioemotional needs that arise from a high performing Title 1 school. Academic rigor is the expectation and students receive support to perform at the highest levels possible. Staff provides education and awareness to destigmatize mental health concerns and encourage families to use mental health resources. Supports are infused throughout our school program using multi-tiered systems of supports.

Implementation

Tier 1 Supports

We infuse our interventions with mindful practices. Mindfulness is the ability to be present in the moment, without judgment. Mindfulness improves students' emotional self-regulation, reduces stress, increases focus, increases relationship satisfaction, and boosts immune functioning. Mindfulness practices employed by CMS are research and evidenced-based. Mindful strategies are taught to the whole school through Advisory, incorporated in Physical Education classes, and taught to 6th grade students during elective classes. They are also used in small group counseling sessions, taught through community-building activities, and shared in parent workshops. In addition, staff members are encouraged to participate in mindfulness practices through relaxation and yoga classes.

Students are guided through meditation and deep breathing exercises at the beginning of the day. The Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Team (PBIS), which is comprised of teachers representing all grade levels and content areas, designs and disseminates advisory activities. During the daily 17-minute morning Advisory period, students engage in mindful activities such as short meditations. Twice a year, our site hosts Mental Health Awareness Day through an extended advisory. Stakeholders participate in various mindful activities such as powerful breathing presentations, labyrinth walks, and yoga sessions.

During Physical Education (PE), students are instructed in deep breathing, visualization, and stretching. Students participate daily in strength, endurance, and object manipulation lessons. This creates a healthy, positive physical and mental experience. Students are coached in deep breathing, how to visualize positive outcomes, and mindful awareness of how the mind and body are connected.

We incorporate community circles to strengthen the learning community and improve peer relationships. The goal is to build community by increasing understanding, empathy, and problem solving. Mindful practice of deep breathing, setting intentions through meditation, and perspective taking are cornerstones of community circles. Over 300 students engage in community circles on a regular basis.

The instrumental music program consists of over one-third of our school population and infuses mental health supports throughout its curriculum. Seven ensembles are open to students of any grade level with an emphasis on acquiring fundamentals which are further developed through an increasingly challenging performance repertoire. Respectfulness and rehearsal etiquette are emphasized and reinforced every day in every ensemble. High standards of performance, scholarship, and citizenship are expected daily of each and every student. Understanding how both success and failure are an essential part of learning and growing allows students to feel safe taking risks within their musicianship. Student progress in the instrumental music program is monitored through “Individual Performance Evaluations” in which students perform assigned selections and are given feedback to meet standards of excellence. The sequentially-based structure of music ensembles allows students to build their technique, perform new styles of music, and improvise within those styles. A musician must utilize skills and content to improvise, drawing upon courage and confidence to make the music happen. This develops grit, empathy, and leadership skills. Instrumental music students feel a sense of camaraderie and belonging (especially important at the middle school level). It also demands a presence of mind bringing students into the moment, an important tool for coping with challenges of life. Finally, the tangible accomplishments gained through a strong music program, including improvement through hard work and successful performances, are essential components of authentic self-esteem.

CMS understands that happy teachers are more likely to foster happy students. We ensure that our teachers also have access to positive mental health. We have an active social committee that brings positivity and community building. Staff are recognized on an individual basis through Employee of the Month, Gratitude Journals, and Staff Shout Outs. We provide professional development on the purpose of mindful practice and how it can increase educational performance. Through staff meetings and PBIS meetings, teachers review data and collaborate around how we can increase mental health resilience in the classroom and school settings. This year, we increased our professional development opportunities by working with the voluntary employees' beneficiary association (VEBA). CMS surveyed staff on personal and professional wellness needs. As a result, CMS teachers engage in physical fitness, meditation and yoga practices facilitated by VEBA. In addition, we created a staff

wellness room where staff come to engage in mindful practices. Our wellness room is equipped with soothing music, fountains, and a meditation center.

Mindful practice and mental health education with parents is encouraged and supported. On CMS Mental Health Awareness days, parents are invited to participate in mindful practice activities with their children. Directly following the mindful practice, parent workshops are held to provide parenting tips on any concerns brought to our attention. Workshops have included effective parent-child communication, adolescent development, growth mindset, and signs of mental health distress. Yearly, funds are allocated through our school budget to provide parenting books and resources.

Tier 2 & 3 Supports:

Sixth grade students engage in purposeful mindful practice and education through a 12-week elective class. Using the curriculum from MindUp (Scholastic), students are taught the neuroscience behind how our brain impacts our thoughts, emotions, and actions. They learn about mindful practice as it relates to optimism, hope, and global action.

We host an after school club to extend our practice outside of school and foster mindful leadership. Chillin' Cheetahs is open to all students and meets after school once a week. Club advisors include the school psychologist, math teacher, history teacher, and education specialist. Student members design their own meditation, mindful awareness, and yoga practices. Challenger's principal provides regular instruction on yoga poses and the effects of yoga on mind and body. Club members further enrich their mindful experiences by going on mindful nature hikes with club advisors and parents.

We provide counseling and infuse mindful practice. Approximately 95 students are referred for individual and group counseling sessions with school-based mental health providers. Counseling sessions address challenges such as anxiety and emotional regulation. Students learn strategies drawn from mindful practices which allows them to connect their perception of situations to their feelings and actions. Mindful strategies are then used to stop the chain of negative thinking so they can engage in healthy problem solving strategies.

In partnership with our community, we address mental health issues. Guest speakers are invited to engage our students with strong messages of strength and acceptance. We partner with Kaiser Permanente to provide assemblies on anti-bullying and suicidal ideation. Approximately 65 students have benefited from monthly mentorship through Big Brothers and Big Sisters. Some of our students need more intense mental health intervention. Using the Problem Solving Team (formerly Student Study Team) model, all stakeholders generate individualized Tier 3 intervention plans. In Tier 3, students have access to individualized therapeutic services, behavior support plans, referrals for 504 eligibility, and assessments to determine eligibility for special education services. Fifty students have been served through Mental Health Services partnerships and Union of Pan Asian Communities Counseling.

Strategic academic supports foster positive mental health which in turn improves academic achievement. We provide opportunities for collaborative conversations with “accountable talk” on a daily basis in all content areas. This encourages engagement in meaningful conversations with peers in a safe and collaborative environment, increasing student willingness to participate in discussions. Educational supports help students feel less anxious and more confident in their abilities within the classroom setting. For our English Learner students, who comprise 4.6% of our population, QTEL strategies (Quality Teaching for English Learners) and SDAIE-based instructions (Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English) are utilized in the classroom. These strategies include sentence starters, scaffolding, modeling, and think alouds. For our students with Special Education (SPED) support, which comprise 11.9% of our population, teachers work closely with the specialists and paraeducators in order to ensure that a wide variety of teaching strategies are being incorporated in the classroom. Students are placed in Study Skills electives with Education Specialists who help support them in their General Education classes.

We also enroll struggling students in a variety of intervention classes. Students are selected based on various criteria such as: low performance on SBACs/standardized tests, low academic grades in core classes, FastBridge reading screen and teacher/counselor recommendation. These classes provide an environment where students receive additional support from a credentialed teacher in core subjects. The class sizes are purposely small (15-20 students), allowing the teacher to better individualize instruction. Because students have an opportunity during the school day to complete work and feel more organized, they feel less stress and anxiety.

Data & Monitoring

Site data from California Healthy Kids Surveys, site-generated surveys on safety and mental health, and content specific assessments inform the socioemotional needs of our students. Since 2011, staff, students and parents are surveyed annually. The data is shared with the school community and interventions are identified to address students’ needs. Consistently, mental health needs have arisen in the areas of stress and anxiety around academics and peer relationships. Over 50% of CMS students report stress. Stress reduction and stress coping strategies have been targeted as intervention areas. Data is monitored, analyzed, and shared. We provide multi-tiered mental health supports to encourage all members of the community to engage in coping strategies. In addition, data are gathered and monitored using content specific measures, such as the California Physical Fitnessgram, to determine performance outcomes. Additional measures include pre and post self reports, grades, SBAC performance, student work, and Fastbridge reading data.

Outcomes

Challenger’s approach to supporting our community’s mental health has a positive effect on our school climate and culture. Of the 1,089 staff, students, and parents surveyed in 2018, we have seen gains in students’ abilities to access mental health resources and

destigmatize mental health issues. Students are using resources such as talking to staff members (17%), talking to peers or siblings (45%), talking to adult family members (43%), and participating in extracurricular activities (35%). The percentage of the CMS community using positive mental health coping strategies has steadily increased over the years. The PE Department's work has maintained consistent high levels of physical fitness as measured by the California Physical Fitnessgram for 7th grade students. A majority of our students score in the healthy zone, which include Abdominal Strength (80.2%), Aerobic Capacity (76.6%) and Flexibility (89.1%). With our community circles, pre- and post-assessment results indicate gains in feelings of safety in the classroom, comfort in sharing with classmates, and comfort in sharing with the teacher. CMS survey data shows that 89% of students feel safe in the classroom, 78% report students are friendly, and 88% acknowledge respect from staff to student. Our 6th grade, mindful elective students also took pre- and post-assessment surveys. Results from their surveys indicate gains in all domains measured where 41% of students reported using self-calming strategies to deal with stress.

We believe that positive mental health increases academic outcomes. In a 2017 CMS mental health survey, 41% of students felt uncomfortable talking in front of peers and 28% felt uncomfortable disagreeing with others on academic topics. By 2018, those numbers improved to only 39% of students feeling uncomfortable talking in front of peers and 25% uncomfortable disagreeing with others on academic topics. These percentages can be correlated with the continued academic excellence that we expect and see in our students. We will continue our efforts to educate the whole child by sustaining high levels of mindfulness education and supports to give students the tools needed to maintain positive mental health throughout their lives.