

AMERICA'S HEALTHIEST SCHOOLS: HOW WE THRIVE

Madera Unified School District

Madera, California



Kaiser Permanente knows healthy schools support improved learning for children and higher job satisfaction among teachers and staff. That's why every year we are proud to sponsor America's Healthiest Schools, one of the country's longest-running national recognition programs honoring schools for their achievements in supporting the comprehensive health needs of students, teachers, and school staff.

In partnership with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the annual awards recognize schools for implementing best practices and policies in up to nine topic areas related to advancing the physical, mental, and social-emotional health of staff, students, and families.

In 2024, 839 schools across 30 states were recognized, including 24 schools from Madera Unified School District in California.

Madera, California is a growing community of more than 50,000 residents. Sitting in the center of the state, it's affectionately known as the "heart of California."

With 20,000 students and 2,000 employees, the Madera Unified School District is guided by a community pledge rooted in providing fair and equitable opportunities and to empower students to live long healthy lives. The district's vision is to set the standard for hard work, creativity, and resiliency with a fearless drive to continuously improve. Their commitment to this idea is evident as 24 of the K-12 schools in the district were awarded America's Healthiest School honors in 2024, many in multiple categories.

Strong relationships between students, staff, parents and caregivers, and the community are the cornerstone of the school district. Strong relationships are one of the key factors in cultivating staff well-being – a Thriving Schools priority and one of the two America's Healthiest Schools categories Kaiser Permanente sponsors.

There were five Madera Unified School District schools that received honors for their work with teachers and staff. Each of the 5 schools focused on several basic guiding principles to develop and cultivate staff well-being:

- Spaces for staff breaks
- At least two free or low-cost events for all staff like meals or milestone celebrations

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- Relationship-building activities
- Formal and continuous gratitude practice

We are pleased to highlight some of their stories, along with advice that school and district leaders have for others who want to recreate their efforts:

Cesar Chavez Elementary School

The biggest takeaway for the leadership of Cesar Chavez is an emphasis on creating a positive culture. The team added fun and a sense of belonging and community with activities for staff such as potlucks, yoga, celebrations, photo walls, and friendly competitions.

“A school site is a ‘divided society’ by nature, with separate grade level groups and separate lunch times. The administration has many outside duties, and staff meetings are utilized for school business. This all complicates attempts to create a culture of acceptance, association, and kinship,” said Cindy Bitter, a physical education teacher at the school and a member of one of several wellness committees.

To address those issues, the team at Cesar Chavez focus a lot of attention on staff break spaces. All staff break spaces have a variety of items designed to encourage relaxation, foster positive staff interactions, and allow for acute stress management. These include gratitude station items like notecards and a kudos board, as well as staff family pictures.

To facilitate not just break rooms, but staff activities, the school has multiple teams and committees dedicated to staff wellness.

“The advice that I would give to other elementary school sites is to utilize several school groups to collaboratively enhance staff well-being together,” said Bitter, who is a member of one of the groups. “The combination of our Chavez groups - which include a Wellness Committee, Sunshine Club, Administration, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) teams - working together is the reason we thrive in cultivating staff wellness.”

Desmond Middle School

Desmond Middle School provides exercise station items, such as yoga mats, resistance bands, small weights, and exercise cards in staff break spaces. But the team went even further, transforming a stage area into a fully functioning gym and weightroom that is exclusively for staff.

Combining their commitment to ongoing education and gratitude, the staff at Desmond Middle takes professional learning one step further by helping staff assess their gratitude

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styles and aligning strategies to those preferred styles (e.g., public recognition, private recognition, acts of services, notes, and gifts). There is also a weekly newsletter from the principal where staff members have an opportunity to offer each other a few words of gratitude and thanks.

The administration team takes an even more active role in celebrating staff through ongoing events. On days when students are off campus, the team will cook staff breakfast and/or host a potluck or catered event with good, healthy food that suits all types of eaters (vegan, keto, pescatarian, vegetarian, etc.).

Madera South High School

Communing around meals has proven to be a winner for the team at Madera South High School as well.

“We realized we can bring the staff together when food is involved,” said athletic director, Andrea Devine. “We do our best to focus on healthy food activities that encourage conversations. For example, we pick a food topic each month and it gives connection opportunities with other staff. We also dedicate one day a month to a food activity, using a crowd-shared Google document to collaborate on ideas and sign-ups.”

When building spaces for breaks, the team is also conscious to include all staff. There are break spaces across the campus, so teachers and support staff have easily accessible areas in the buildings where they spend most of their days.

“Our biggest takeaway is that it is important to prioritize social emotional learning when it comes to our staff well-being. Promoting gratitude practice for all staff through assorted opportunities such as small staff gifts, popcorn pick-me-ups, and staff gift exchange activities,” said Devine. “These activities allow our staff to learn about other staff through small gestures.”

Matilda Torres High School

While the Madera Unified School District has a team approach to staff well-being, that doesn't mean there isn't a little healthy competition baked in. The staff from Torres and Madera South High Schools play in a staff kickball game. All staff are invited to play or watch. The event helps promote relationship building by meeting other staff members from the district while adding a little school team spirit by cheering for their colleagues.

Activities like this are important because Torres High School opened at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Our school was newly opened when the pandemic started and we are growing” said Sean Carlson, a physical education teacher at Torres. “We wanted to make sure we provide more

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for staff as we grow. We are always looking to find ideas to support them and keep them motivated in staff well-being.”

The biggest takeaway for the team? No one is doing this by themselves.

“It is important to create relationships with community partners. We appreciate the work our community partners do for our schools,” said Carlson.

Partnerships include Madera County Department of Public Health, UC CalFresh, Camarena, Kaiser Permanente, Alliance for a Healthier Generation, Action for Healthy Kids, American Heart Association, Dairy Council, Red Cross (AED / First Aid / Safety Plans), and Safe Route (Fire, Police Department, Sheriff, Probation).

Virigina Lee Rose Elementary School

The team at Virginia Lee Rose Elementary School uses many of the same tools and tactics as their neighboring schools. Some unique offerings for staff break spaces include backyard activities like a golf putting green, corn hole, and ladder-ball.

There is also a shout-out wall in the teachers’ lounge, public recognition from administrators during staff meetings, and a fun tradition of passing along a stuffed toy to different staff members with a treat to spread joy and appreciation throughout the year.

A guiding force for the work the team does to build staff well-being is the Healthier Generation Action Center and the Thriving Schools Integrated Assessment. They use these tools to encourage collaboration, and the requirements as prompts to have discussions and assess efforts.

“It is a powerful guide for us,” said Rachel Noia, the school’s physical education teacher.

Some of the relationship-building exercises the staff get to take part in include a “snowball” activity where staff write a positive comment about another staff member on a piece of paper, crumple it up into a snowball and throw it to the center. Staff then pick up a different paper and try to guess whose reflection they have. The staff also engage in pair-shares during staff meetings where colleagues can share positive takeaways from the week.

Simplicity is key for the team at Virigina Lee Rose Elementary School.

“Our biggest takeaway is to have small activities and efforts; it doesn’t have to be big. Staff will notice,” said Noia. “Pick one or two things to focus on. Pick the most manageable, build on it. Start somewhere.”

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The America's Healthiest Schools awards reinforce the mission of Kaiser Permanente's Thriving Schools initiative, which works to strengthen the health and well-being of school communities across the country, so every school succeeds, every employee excels, and every child thrives.

Kaiser Permanente is proud to be a partner in health to districts like Madera Unified throughout the year. For more information on Thriving Schools, visit kp.org/thrivingschools or follow [@thrivingschools](https://twitter.com/thrivingschools) on X.

[Learn more](#) about the America's Healthiest Schools awards.

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