

# Shasta County Office of Education

An “Every Student, Every Option” Strategy and Innovative Funding Approaches Transform Rural Education



Source: Shasta County Office of Education

When you step into a high school classroom in Shasta County, in the north of California’s Sacramento Valley, it’s clear the environment aims to prioritize every student’s journey.

Mike, a senior at Enterprise High School, travels daily to another high school to attend a dual enrollment class focused on space engineering. Mike and his classmates are designing a prototype space rover to explore Europa, Jupiter’s moon, to see if it has underground rivers. His work includes virtual simulations and collaboration with NASA scientists, bridging high school learning with cutting-edge career pathways. This program not only nurtures Mike’s technical skills but strengthens his determination to become a space engineer.

Chris, a senior in a continuation high school, found a new sense of purpose through the fire certification program offered by the Shasta-Trinity Regional Occupational Program. Having experienced homelessness, the program helped Chris recover

high school credits, train as a firefighter, and access essential resources. As a result, he’s on track to graduate and begin a career with CalFire or pursue further education.

## Shasta COE’s rural hub model enables small districts to achieve outsized impact and strengthens systemwide coherence

Building on nearly two decades of steady work, Shasta County Office of Education (Shasta COE) has benefited tremendously from state funding—including the opportunity to coordinate a 38-school Community Schools consortium. Shasta COE is a testament to how thoughtful state policies can empower county offices of education to serve as regional transformation hubs, enabling small rural districts to access grants and receive implementation support that otherwise would be difficult, if not impossible, to access individually. This compelling structural innovation promotes greater equity in rural

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areas, offering a model for other communities with similar circumstances.

As a county office serving predominantly small, rural districts—many with fewer than 1,000 students—the Shasta COE functions as both a coordinator and direct service provider. It often serves as the practical equivalent of a district office for schools that lack the capacity to access competitive state grants independently.

The county's students complete high school ready for college and careers at a significantly higher rate than the state average. In doing so, they are beating the odds, given Shasta's historically high rates of mortality, obesity, drug addiction, teen pregnancy, poverty, and unemployment, and given that 70% of high school students are the first in their family to attend college.

And while the statistics matter, and the systemic approach is essential, educators make clear that the work here is also personal. “We don’t just teach kids—we raise them. These are our kids, our neighbors’ kids,” said a school counseling coordinator. “The teachers, the principals—most of them grew up here. We see ourselves in our students, and that’s why we push so hard to make sure they have every opportunity we can give them.”

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—School counseling coordinator

Shasta COE serves approximately 24 mostly rural school districts that range widely in size. The Redding School District, for example, serves almost 3,000

## County Office of Education Profile

**Enrollment:** Approximately 26,700 students

**Student demographics:**

- 3% English language learners
- 14% students with disabilities
- 58% low socioeconomic status
- 63% students of color

**Location:** Shasta County

**Community:** Rural

**College and career readiness score:** 35%

**Graduation rate:** 90%

**Chronic absenteeism rate:** 18%

SOURCES: DATAQUEST, CA  
DASHBOARD, SHASTA COUNTY OFFICE  
OF EDUCATION

students, while the Mountain Union Elementary School District has just 64 students. For the smallest districts, Shasta COE operates in all practical matters as the district office. It also directly operates three schools with a total enrollment of 173 students.

The county office is highly regarded for its strong educational outcomes. In 2020, the county had the highest rate of enrollment at top postsecondary institutions among all California's rural counties, which led to recognition by the California School Boards Association with a Golden Bell Award for educational excellence in equity and access.

Shasta COE's transformation began almost 20 years ago with the stark realization that Shasta County led the state on troubling social indicators of health and well-being. From high rates of poverty and unemployment to low levels of educational attainment, the challenges were immense. The COE laid the groundwork for initiatives that prioritized equity, innovation, and collaboration.

## Expanding educational opportunities through diverse programs, pathways, and partnerships

The county office of education aims to embody its motto, “Every Student, Every Option,” through a comprehensive set of programs and pathways that empower students to

pursue their unique interests, goals, and dreams. Key components of the strategy include:

**Open Enrollment:** Shasta COE allows students to attend schools outside their immediate geographic boundaries, to better align with their academic and career interests.

**Regional Occupational Program and CTE for All:** The Shasta-Trinity Regional Occupational Program and the Shasta Union High School District's career technical education (CTE) program provide hands-on training in high-demand fields such as healthcare, firefighting, and automotive technology to students across the county. Students immerse themselves in state-of-the-art facilities, including professional-grade kitchens, fire engines, and medical simulation labs. They work under the guidance of industry professionals to earn certifications for immediate entry into the workforce or further education. Shasta COE also supported the development of CTE pathways in each district and school countywide.

**Dual and Concurrent Enrollment:** Partnerships with institutions like Shasta College enable high school students to take college-level courses in space engineering, business management, and other areas. "It's incredible to be working on projects like designing a space rover while still in high school," said Mike, the senior at Enterprise High School. "This experience makes my dream of becoming an engineer feel so much closer."

**Comprehensive Electives and Personalized Learning:** Beyond core academics and specialized programs, Shasta County schools offer electives designed to spark curiosity and creativity, from music and art to advanced robotics and American Sign Language.

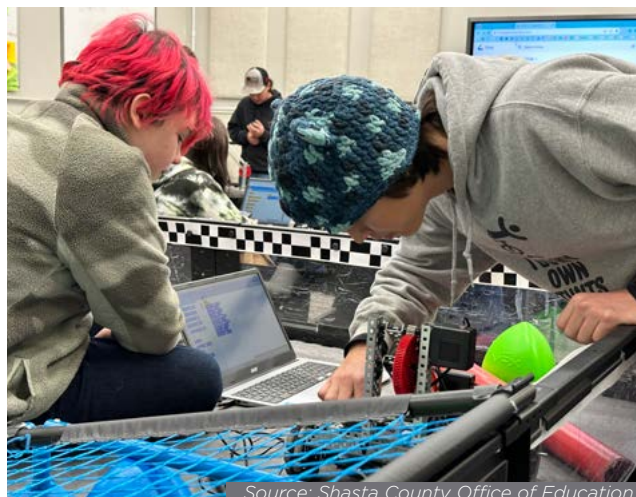
**Flexible Pathways for Every Student:** The county provides alternative education options for students who thrive outside traditional settings. Continuation schools, independent study programs, and online learning platforms offer tailored support to these students.

## Shasta COE's tiered counseling approach bridges academic, career, and college readiness supports

Guided by the American School Counselor Association, Shasta COE's systemwide approach aims to ensure that all students receive consistent, high-quality support across academic, social-emotional, and career readiness domains. The foundation of the county's school counseling strategy is a

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—Mike, a senior  
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Source: Shasta County Office of Education

comprehensive, tiered framework. Tier 1 support includes lessons on college readiness, mental health awareness, financial literacy, and preparing college financial aid applications. Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports address more individualized needs.

Professional collaboration is another pillar of the counseling strategy. Monthly meetings bring together school counselors, administrators, and the county's counseling coordinator to share resources, analyze data, and refine practices. Counselors also leverage partnerships with Shasta College and local employers to provide dual enrollment opportunities and CTE pathways. A-G completion rates and career readiness in Shasta have improved significantly as a result.

## Community schools funding helps create safe spaces for students and families to access resources

An especially powerful example of how state funding has enabled Shasta COE to go the extra mile for families is with the Community Connect initiative, which integrates counseling with other resources, such as help accessing healthcare, housing and even food assistance.

Visiting a Community Connect center reveals the heart of the initiative. At one site, a mother sits with a “connector” to discuss housing options while her children browse books in a cozy reading nook. Nearby, a high school student picks up a bag of nonperishable food to take home, ensuring his family

has meals for the week. On another day, a connector might guide a family through enrolling in Medi-Cal (California's Medicaid healthcare program) or arranging transportation to a specialist appointment.

State funding for community schools has been a game changer for Community Connect, enabling Shasta COE to expand staffing, enhance services, and create “safe” spaces where families access resources in a welcoming environment. Scaling and diversifying its offerings through California Community Schools Partnership Program funding has helped Community Connect solidify its role as a cornerstone of Shasta COE's educational and social support infrastructure.

The impact of the initiative is profound and multifaceted. Shasta COE reports that Community Connect has improved student attendance, increased financial and housing stability among families, enhanced trust between schools and communities, and reduced inequitable access to school and community resources.

## Shasta COE creates economies of scale by strategically pooling state funds across small rural districts

By carefully aligning available resources with local priorities, the county office has deepened, expanded, and grown impactful programs across districts and schools. The process begins with a proactive search for state funding opportunities that align with Shasta COE's core priorities. For example, when California launched funding for community schools, Shasta

COE saw an opportunity to enhance its existing Community Connect initiative. Once funding is identified, Shasta COE takes a systematic approach to implementation by assessing needs, developing concrete plans with clear timelines, and establishing accountability measures. The office also provides technical assistance to schools and districts.

By focusing on alignment, capacity building, and sustainability, Shasta COE has created a system that not only meets immediate needs but lays the groundwork for long-term success. “State funds are a powerful tool, but it's how we use them that makes the difference,” said Superintendent Mike Freeman. “By staying focused on our core priorities, we ensure that every dollar works toward building a stronger, more equitable future for our students.”

At the heart of Shasta COE's efforts is the belief that education should open doors, not close them. With diverse programs and pathways, the county seeks to ensure students are not limited by geography, circumstances, or preconceived expectations. And yet, the vibrancy in CTE pathways, electives, and dual enrollment across the county is not evident in the academic core. Another area for exploration is developing locally valid and reliable measures of students “thriving” in the county that are difficult, if not impossible, to capture via traditional state measures.

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The Executive Summary, Policy Brief, and other district case studies can be found at <https://michaelfullan.ca/articles/>.

## Key Takeaways

- » Shasta COE's education system exemplifies a commitment to providing diverse and flexible pathways to personalize every student's educational journey.
- » The county has maintained a consistent trajectory of improvement for nearly 20 years. A culture of collaboration, rooted in robust communication and data-driven practices, has allowed it to test, refine, and scale innovative initiatives.
- » The school counseling strategy aims to ensure that students receive robust academic, social-emotional, and career guidance.
- » Community Connect stands out as a model for integrating schools with community resources to address barriers like housing instability and healthcare access. The infusion of state funds for community schools has expanded staffing, enhanced services, and created welcoming spaces on campuses.
- » Shasta COE's approach to leveraging state funds ensures alignment with local priorities to maximize long-term impact.