

Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

A Commitment to Student Agency, Individualized Pathways, and Collaborative Learning



Source: Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

Walking into a high school in Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, the energy is palpable. Students are immersed in hands-on, inquiry-based learning that allows them to explore their interests, develop skills, and address community challenges. From the hum of digital design studios to the quiet concentration of ceramics workshops, the sense of purpose in these spaces is unmistakable. Students are not just attending school; they are actively shaping their educational journeys.

In a ceramics class, students bring monsters drawn by kindergarteners to life by transforming sketches into three-dimensional pottery. The high schoolers meticulously shape and paint their creations, knowing that soon the young children who drew the monsters will receive their original drawings back along with the handcrafted ceramic versions. The project encapsulates the spirit of learning in Monterey: creativity, connection, and a sense of purpose.

In the Digital Arts and Design studio, students move through a gallery walk, assessing and providing

feedback on each other's portfolios. The portfolios, built since their freshman year, showcase a range of artistic expression—photography, short films, website designs, logos, and animations.

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In biochemistry, students in small teams attempt to solve complex problems such as calculating changes in enthalpy in a chemical reaction. Their grades depend not only on individual performance but on the group's collective understanding—an incentive structure that fosters collaboration, peer teaching, and deep engagement.

Innovative state funding has bolstered the district's endeavors, including an \$8.8 million grant awarded in 2024 from the California Community Schools

This brief is based on case studies featured in Fine, S.M., Rincón-Gallardo, S., Fullan, M. (2026) *Whole Learners, Whole Systems*.

Partnership Program to support both academic and social-emotional support for students and a recent \$500,000 state grant to expand service learning and civic engagement.

Beyond the classroom, Monterey Peninsula Unified high schools work to ensure that students have time in their schedules to explore their passions. The “flex period” at Marina High School allows students to self-select an activity or study session from a rotating menu—from preparing for math finals to making crafts while listening to Taylor Swift. Some students use the time for extra academic support; others dive into personal interests. “The menu changes every other week,” one administrator explains. “Students get a lot of autonomy in deciding how they want to use that time.”

The student experience is shaped by a belief shared among district and school leaders that education should be meaningful, engaging, and tailored to youths’ interests and aspirations. Whether students are designing public art, conducting scientific research, or preparing for a career in the medical fields, they are given the space, resources, and support to pursue their goals. Learning here is not just about accumulating credits—it is about discovery, creativity, and connection.

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—Marina High School administrator

Progress in the district is rooted in students feeling seen, supported, and inspired

When a group of students expressed interest in marine biology, their counselor didn’t just note it—they surveyed other students, discovered broader interest, and successfully proposed a new marine biology course that launched the following year. Meanwhile, other students found their passion through an internship at the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s biotechnology lab, where industry mentors helped them see a clear path from high school coursework to college and career.

These stories reflect how the district’s students experience being truly seen, centered, and inspired.

District Profile

Enrollment: Approximately 9,300 students

Student demographics:

- 26% English language learners
- 16% students with disabilities
- 66% low socioeconomic status
- 81% students of color

Location: Monterey County

Community: Suburban

College and career readiness score: 62%

Graduation rate: 95%

Chronic absenteeism rate: 14%

SOURCE: [CA DASHBOARD](#)

The comprehensive approach begins with emphasizing authentic, relevant learning activities that develop empowered and engaged critical thinkers with mastery of knowledge and skills. Through initiatives like the Vision 2025+ Task Force, the district analyzes enrollment patterns, student performance data, and community input to make decisions on school configurations, grade levels, and attendance boundaries.

The comprehensive high schools—Monterey High, Seaside High, and Marina High—are designed to ensure that every student feels seen, supported, and inspired to grow. Students are afforded an array of academic and career pathways, tailored schedules, and a culture that encourages exploration, inquiry, and deep engagement.

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All three comprehensive high schools offer multiple career technical education (CTE) pathways. At Monterey High School, students choose from biotechnology, transportation, robotics and engineering, sports medicine, theatre, digital media, and dance. Work-based learning specialists help students secure internships, facilitate job shadowing, and coordinate industry guest speakers.

The district takes a data-driven approach to refining CTE offerings. Course requests and career interest surveys guide decisions on which pathways to expand or develop. Many CTE courses are structured to fulfill state A-G requirements, and the district also leverages dual enrollment and concurrent enrollment agreements with local colleges.



Source: Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

Monterey Peninsula Unified centers student wellness and belonging as cornerstones of academic success

Walking through Monterey Peninsula high schools, there is a palpable sense of community. The district seeks to ensure that students feel seen, supported, and valued. Cultivating positive relationships is a priority, evident in the ways school leaders, teachers, and support staff interact with students—through a simple handshake with a principal in the hallway, a personal check-in from a teacher before class, or a guidance counselor stopping by a lunch table to ask how a student's college applications are going. “We work to create a culture where adults love kids,” says one school leader. “And loving them means holding them accountable, setting high expectations, and making sure they have the support they need to meet them.”

The district prioritizes student wellbeing, having revamped its approach to mental health by embedding systems of support within each high school. For example, the “Zen Den” in Monterey High School's wellness center offers a quiet, restorative space where stressed students can take a break,

regulate emotions, and receive counseling. “We have students who... just need 15 minutes to decompress in the Zen Den,” explains a school counselor. “Having that space and knowing they are supported makes all the difference.”

Monterey Peninsula Unified also created a resource center to address challenges students face outside school. Recognizing that nearly 10% of students are experiencing homelessness or in foster care, each high school has a designated space stocked with essential supplies—food, clothing, hygiene products, and even a washer and dryer. This holistic approach underscores a belief that when basic needs are met, students can fully engage in learning.

Leaders at Monterey Peninsula Unified understand that a student's connection to school is a strong predictor of success, so the district creates opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with peers and adults. One example is Breaking Down the Walls, a district-wide program with full-day workshops. Through guided conversations and activities, students share experiences, listen to each other's stories, and develop a greater appreciation for the struggles and strengths of their peers.

Athletics, performing arts, and career pathways also serve as entry points for connection. Whether it's the marching band program that was reinstated at the request of students, thriving CTE pathways, or student mentorship programs, Monterey Peninsula Unified aims to ensure that every student can find a place to belong.

Monterey Peninsula Unified encourages agency and autonomy at all levels—for students, educators, and schools

By design, Monterey Peninsula Unified students have a voice in shaping their educational experience. For example, the district builds its master course schedules with student input. Each spring, students complete surveys indicating courses they want, and the district designs schedules accordingly. This same culture of responsiveness extends to student-driven flex periods in which students self-select activities based on their needs and interests—from academic tutoring to creative workshops and personal enrichment.

Underlying these efforts is a central office that is deeply engaged in supporting schools. Monterey Peninsula Unified prioritizes site-level autonomy while ensuring district-wide consistency in mental health,

student engagement, and equity. District leaders are visible and accessible. The district also embraces a data-driven approach to student well-being, using real-time data to track attendance, behavior, and academic engagement.

Monterey Peninsula Unified also displays a commitment to continuous learning and collaboration among educators. Across high schools, the district fosters an environment where teachers, counselors, administrators, and district leaders work together to refine their practice, share insights, and innovate. It's all about cultivating professional trust and site-based autonomy. "The district gives us the flexibility to design our own curriculum, adapt instructional approaches, and create learning experiences that best serve our students," explains one teacher. "We are not boxed into a single pedagogical model—we are encouraged to experiment, collaborate, and continuously refine our craft."

Collaboration between educators within and across schools drives professional learning and innovation

The district takes a data-driven approach to continuous improvement, using real-time data—such as attendance trends, engagement levels, and formative assessments. It proactively supports professional learning, ensuring that teachers, counselors, and school leaders have access to high-quality development opportunities. This includes district-sponsored professional learning communities,

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—High school teacher

leadership development for principals and assistant principals, and cross-district learning exchanges.

Educators are encouraged to question, innovate, and refine their craft in collaboration with colleagues. As one teacher put it, "We are learning alongside our students. And when we model that for them, we show them that learning is not just something that happens in school—it's a lifelong journey."

Monterey Peninsula Unified has built a strong foundation for student learning and well-being. At the same time, areas where the district can push its impact to the next level include addressing difficulties with teacher retention; increasing consistency in academic rigor, especially for immigrant and multilingual students; and expanding and strengthening partnerships with local businesses, colleges, and industry leaders.

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

Key Takeaways

- » Students in Monterey Peninsula Unified have a say in shaping their educational experience, from flexible scheduling to course creation based on their interest.
- » Learning experiences are designed to be relevant, meaningful, and inquiry-driven, whether that's through collaborating in biochemistry labs, creating digital arts portfolios, or pursuing career technical education pathways.
- » Relationships are at the heart of the educational model at Monterey Peninsula Unified. Schools are designed to be welcoming, safe, and deeply supportive.
- » Mental health and student well-being are prioritized through a comprehensive, multi-tiered support system. Each high school has full-time mental health professionals and dedicated spaces like the Zen Den, where students can take a break when overwhelmed.
- » Real-world opportunities are highly valued, with career technical education programs fully integrated into the student experience. Pathways in biotechnology, digital media, sports medicine, and transportation are designed to be both career- and college-aligned.
- » Teachers benefit from structured collaboration time, instructional coaching, and cross-school learning exchanges. The district prioritizes teacher agency.