

# **CARES**

## **Comprehensive Assessment of Resilience and Emotional Strengths**

### **Survey Administration Guide**

#### **Introduction**

The CARES Wellness Screener is a 34-item Tier 1 universal screening tool for students in grades 6–12, co-developed by WestEd and the UCSB School Mental Health Collaborative. The screening component of CARES is the California Student Wellness Index (CSWI), which assesses students across two wellness dimensions: social-emotional distress and multidimensional life satisfaction. A key strength of CARES is that it measures both emotional distress and well-being — not risk alone. This dual-factor approach helps schools identify students who may be struggling despite appearing fine, as well as students who report low distress but few positive strengths to draw on. CARES also includes two additional components that provide important information: the School Connectedness Scale and a short form of the Social Emotional Health Survey, which measures Covitality — a composite of students' resilience factors related to belief in self, belief in others, emotional competence, and engaged living.

This guide describes the roles, responsibilities, and procedures for administering the CARES survey at your school(s). It is organized into sections outlining key responsibilities for district coordinators, school site coordinators, and teachers/proctors involved in survey administration, along with potential follow-up activities after the survey is completed.

#### **Purpose of the CARES Screener**

CARES is designed to help schools in identifying students who may require additional social-emotional or mental health support before issues intensify. By screening all students, CARES ensures that struggling individuals in need are not overlooked, including those who do not self-refer or are not identified by school staff.

## How to Use this Guide

This guide is organized by survey administration coordination and support roles. Find your role section and follow the steps in order.

| Role                    | Go to               |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| District Coordinator    | Section A – page 3  |
| School Site Coordinator | Section B – page 5  |
| Teacher/Proctor         | Section C – page 7  |
| Post-Survey Planning    | Section D – page 10 |
| Resource and Support    | Section E – page 12 |

## Overview of the CARES Administrative Process

A typical CARES administration cycle follows this sequence.

| Timing                     | Activity                                                                                                |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4+ weeks before the survey | District registers and executes data privacy agreement; parent guardian notifications sent <sup>1</sup> |
| 3-4 weeks before survey    | Onboarding call with WestEd; survey window confirmed                                                    |
| 2-3 weeks before survey    | Staff briefed; survey link tested                                                                       |
| 1 week before survey       | Final reminders to families; classroom time scheduled; proctors receive script                          |
| Survey window              | Students complete CARES screener (~10 minutes per student)                                              |
| 1-3 weeks after survey     | Dashboard results reviewed with school care team; follow-up activities initiated.                       |

### Data Privacy and Confidentiality

CARES is administered as part of a district-approved student wellness program. Results are protected under FERPA. Individual student results may be shared only with authorized school personnel (e.g., administrators, school psychologists, and counselors) on a need-to-know basis. Aggregate results may be used for program planning and LCAP reporting. WestEd is registered with the Student Data Privacy Consortium ([privacy.a4l.org](https://privacy.a4l.org) or [www.cite.org/cspa](https://www.cite.org/cspa)).

<sup>1</sup> We recommended that parent notifications be sent during first week of school year in the school registration packet.

## Section A: District Coordinator

The district coordinator manages all aspects of the CARES administration across school sites, serves as the primary contact for WestEd, and ensures that all schools are prepared, informed, and supported throughout the administration cycle.

### A1. Before the Survey Window

#### Establish Screener Administration Plan

- Confirm the survey window (fall: September-November, spring: February-April) with the WestEd CARES team.
- Identify which schools and grade levels will participate.
- Designate a school site coordinator at each participating campus (see Section B).
- Ensure the district's Student Data Privacy Agreement with WestEd is executed before data collection begins.

#### Parental Consent

Districts are responsible for determining and administering parental consent in accordance with district policy. The following structure is recommended:

| Grade Level | Recommended Consent Approach                                                               |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grade 6     | Active consent —written parental permission required before student may participate        |
| Grades 7-12 | Passive consent — parents notified in advance; students participate unless parents opt out |

 WestEd provides template notification letters for both active and passive consent processes ([cares.wested.org/#resources](https://cares.wested.org/#resources)).

- Send parent/guardian notifications at least two weeks before the planned survey window.
- Compile a list of students whose parents have declined participation and distribute it to school site coordinators.

#### Dashboard User Access

- Use the Dashboard User Registration Form to add or remove authorized staff who will have access to CARES results.
- Designate access levels for each user (school-level or district-level view).
- Submit all updates in a single file — not separate files — to streamline processing.
- Notify the WestEd CARES team once dashboard user updates are complete.

## A2. During the Survey Window

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- Monitor survey completion rates by school using the Response Counts view on the CARES dashboard ([cares.wested.org/#dashboard](https://cares.wested.org/#dashboard)).
- Communicate regularly with school site coordinators to encourage participation and address any issues.
- Contact the WestEd CARES team promptly if technical problems are reported at any site.

## A3. After the Survey Window

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- Confirm with each school site coordinator that their administration window is complete.
- Notify the WestEd CARES team once all sites have finished.
- Access district-level results on the CARES dashboard ([cares.wested.org/#dashboard](https://cares.wested.org/#dashboard)) after data processing is complete.
- Schedule a district-level data review meeting with relevant staff (see Section D).

## Section B: School Site Coordinator

The school site coordinator manages CARES logistics at the school level. This person is the day-to-day point of contact for teachers, proctors, and families, and ensures a smooth, well-organized administration on campus.

### B1. Before the Survey Window

#### Plan the Administration

- Confirm your school's administration dates with the district coordinator.
- Identify which classrooms and grade levels will participate and confirm scheduling with teachers.
- Coordinate classroom time — approximately 10 minutes per student, though scheduling a 20–25 minute block is recommended to allow time for instructions and questions.

#### Parent and Family Outreach

- Follow the consent process established by the district coordinator.
- For **active consent (Grade 6)**: distribute consent forms, collect signed returns, and record which students are authorized to participate.
- For **passive consent (Grades 7–12)**: send notification letters home and track any families who opt their students out.
- Compile a final list of students NOT authorized to participate and share it with all relevant teachers and proctors before survey day.

#### Prepare Staff

- Provide survey training to all teachers and proctors who will administer the survey (see Section C for their instructions).
- Share the school-specific survey link with all teachers/proctors.
- Test the survey link before the administration window. Open the link on a school device and confirm it reaches the first page and shows the correct school name. **Do not submit any responses during testing.** If the link is blocked, contact your district IT department and the WestEd CARES team.
- If your district uses a content filter or firewall, please confirm with IT that the survey platform is accessible on school devices and networks.
- Announce to all staff that the CARES Survey will be administered.

### Testing the Survey Link

Open the survey link on a school-issued device using the same network students will use (e.g., school Wi-Fi). If the first page of the survey loads, the link is working correctly. **Do not click Next** to proceed beyond the first page, as this will register an incomplete response. To review all survey questions, refer to the PDF version of the survey.

### SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT TO STAFF

This week, all XXXX graders will take the Comprehensive Assessment of Resilience and Emotional Strengths (CARES) survey. The survey asks students about how connected they feel to school, their experiences with anxiety and depression, and their overall life satisfaction. Their answers help us to learn about each student's strengths and areas where they might need extra support.

Once the survey is completed, we will review the results and reach out individually to students who may benefit from additional support. Follow-up may include a meeting with their counselor, individual or group counseling, or a referral to the district nurse, school intern, or external services.

Please encourage your students to answer the questions honestly. Let them know this is a safe way to ask for help, and that we will follow up to support individual students and improve our school as a whole.

## B2. During the Survey Window

- Remind teachers and proctors of their scheduled administration dates one to two days in advance.
- Be available during the administration window to answer questions and address any issues.
- Monitor survey completion rates using the Response Counts view on the CARES dashboard ([cares.wested.org/#dashboard](https://cares.wested.org/#dashboard)).
- Follow up with classrooms that have not yet completed the survey to encourage participation within the window.
- Document any unusual circumstances (e.g., student absences, technical issues) that may affect completion rates.

## B3. After the Survey Window

- Confirm with all teachers and proctors that administration is complete.
- Notify the district coordinator that your school has finished.
- Access school-level results on the CARES dashboard ([cares.wested.org/#dashboard](https://cares.wested.org/#dashboard)) after data processing is complete.

- Organize a school-level data review meeting with relevant staff (see Section D).

## Section C: Teacher/Proctor Instructions

Teachers and proctors are responsible for administering the CARES screener directly to students. Your role is to create a calm, supportive environment, read the introduction script clearly, ensure eligible students have access to the survey, and provide alternative activities for non-participating students.

### C1. Before the Survey Window

- Obtain the school-specific survey link from your school site coordinator.
- Review the student introduction script (see below) so you are comfortable reading it aloud.
- Receive the list of students who are NOT authorized to participate from your school site coordinator. Prepare a quiet alternate activity for those students.
- Confirm that your classroom has working internet-connected devices for all participating students.
- Plan to set aside a 15–25 minute block of instructional time (the survey takes approximately 10 minutes; allow extra time for setup and questions).

### C2. On Survey Day – Step by Step

1. Prepare the room. Ensure all participating students have a device with internet access. Ask students to close other browser tabs or applications.
2. Identify non-participating students. Quietly direct students without parental consent to their alternate activity before the survey begins. Do not draw attention to these students.
3. Read the student introduction script (see below). Read the full script aloud before students open the survey link.
4. Distribute the survey link. Write the link on the board, project it, or share it through your learning management system. Ask students to open it but not to begin until instructed.
5. Confirm students enter their student ID when prompted. This is needed to match screener results to the dashboard. Remind students that the survey information is kept confidential.
6. Ask students to complete the survey independently and quietly. Remind them there are no right or wrong answers and that their responses are confidential.
7. Circulate to assist students with questions about the technology or entering their student ID number. Do not interpret survey items or suggest how students should respond.
8. Once students have finished, instruct them to close the browser tab. Please ensure they do not share or compare their responses.

9. Document and report to your site administrator any unusual circumstances (e.g., student absences, technical issues) that may affect completion rates.
10. Notify your school site coordinator when your class has completed the survey.

### C3. Student Introduction Script

#### READ THIS SCRIPT ALOUD TO STUDENTS BEFORE BEGINNING THE SURVEY

Today you'll have the opportunity to complete a short survey about how you're feeling, what your strengths are, and how connected you feel to school. This survey is called CARES, which stands for Comprehensive Assessment of Resilience and Emotional Strengths.

#### Here are a few important things to know:

- The survey has 34 questions and takes about 15 minutes to complete.
- There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer honestly based on how you have been feeling.
- Your individual responses are confidential. Your answers will not affect your grades.
- Results are shared only with selected school staff —such as the school psychologist or counselors — who use them to better support students.
- Your participation is voluntary. If you prefer not to participate or feel uncomfortable with any question, you may stop at any time without penalty.

When you open the survey, you will be asked to enter your student ID. Please enter it carefully. Then answer each question by selecting the response that best describes you.

#### Does anyone have questions before we begin?

*[Pause to answer questions. After addressing questions, ask students to open the survey link and begin.]*

### C4. Responding to Common Student Questions

| If a student asks...                 | You can say...                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "Who sees my answers?"               | "Selected school staff – like the school psychologist or your counselor – can see the results. The results are not shared with your teachers. They use the information to support students at our school." |
| "What if I don't want to take it?"   | "Participation is voluntary. You can work on <i>[alternate activity]</i> instead. Just let me know quietly."                                                                                               |
| "What do the questions mean?"        | "Just do your best to answer based on how you've been feeling. There are no right or wrong answers."                                                                                                       |
| "Will this affect my grade?"         | "No. Your responses are completely separate from your academic work."                                                                                                                                      |
| "What if I get upset by a question?" | "You can stop at any time. If you'd like to talk to someone, you can speak with <i>[school counselor name]</i> ."                                                                                          |

**If a Student Appears Distressed**

If a student appears upset during or after the survey, check in with them privately. If needed, connect them with your school counselor or psychologist. Do not provide counseling. Focus on creating a supportive environment and letting students know that help is available.

## Section D: Post-Survey Follow-Up

Completing the survey is just the first step. The real value of CARES comes from reviewing results and using them to support students and inform school planning. This section outlines recommended follow-up activities for school and district staff.

### D1. Review Survey Completion

- Check the Response Counts view on the CARES dashboard ([cares.wested.org/#dashboard](https://cares.wested.org/#dashboard)) to confirm participation rates by school and grade level.
- Note any classrooms or grade levels with unusually low completion and investigate whether a makeup window is warranted.
- Document overall participation rates for reporting and planning purposes.

### D2. Identify Students for Follow-Up

- Review CSWI scores. Identify students scoring in the lowest 15% relative to California norms. These students may be experiencing elevated emotional distress. Consider a follow-up conversation or referral.
- Coordinate with school counselors, school psychologists, and administrators to identify and implement appropriate interventions for students who have been identified as needing support.
- Follow your district's protocols for outreach, referral, and follow-up documentation..
- Maintain records of all follow-up actions as required by district policies and student confidentiality standards.

⚠ CARES results identify students who may benefit from additional support – they are not a clinical diagnosis. Follow-up should be conducted by trained school mental health professionals in accordance with established district protocols.

### D3. Share and Discuss Results

- Schedule a data review meeting with the school Care Team (school psychologist, counselors, administrators, and other relevant staff) within 1–3 weeks after the survey window closes.
- Use the CARES dashboard ([cares.wested.org/#dashboard](https://cares.wested.org/#dashboard)) to walk through school-level and subgroup results, including wellness risk scores, social-emotional strengths, and school connectedness.
- Identify patterns across grade levels, subgroups, or classrooms that may warrant schoolwide attention.

- When sharing results with staff, present them as group data. Only share individual student results in a group if you have followed the correct protocols.

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#### **D4. Use Results for Planning**

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- Incorporate CARES findings into your school's MTSS process to inform the allocation of Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 supports.
- Use district-level results to support LCAP wellness goal reporting and planning.
- Identify schoolwide strengths to celebrate and build upon, not just areas of concern.
- Compare results across administration windows (fall and spring, when administered twice in one school year) to monitor trends and evaluate the impact of interventions.
- Use aggregated results to inform schoolwide prevention, intervention, and wellness programming.
- Share summary reports with the school board to explain how the survey was conducted, what we learned about students' social-emotional wellness, and what steps are being taken now and, in the future, to support students' wellbeing.

## Section E: Resources and Support

### E1. CARES Resources

| Resource                                             | Where to Find it                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CARES administration site                            | <a href="https://cares.wested.org">cares.wested.org</a>                                      |
| CARES research and instrument documentation          | <a href="https://www.cares-wellness-screener.org">www.cares-wellness-screener.org</a>        |
| Secondary CARES Technical Manual                     | Available at <a href="https://osf.io/ge2sb/files/gsx8j">https://osf.io/ge2sb/files/gsx8j</a> |
| UCSB School Mental Health Collaborative (CoVitality) | <a href="https://www.covitalityucsb.info">www.covitalityucsb.info</a>                        |
| Dashboard user guide                                 | Available at <a href="https://cares.wested.org/#resources">cares.wested.org/#resources</a>   |
| Printing and PDF export guide                        | Available at <a href="https://cares.wested.org/#resources">cares.wested.org/#resources</a>   |
| Parent/guardian notification templates               | Available at <a href="https://cares.wested.org/#resources">cares.wested.org/#resources</a>   |
| Student Data Privacy Agreement                       | Contact <a href="mailto:cares@wested.org">cares@wested.org</a>                               |

### E2. Research and Background

| Topic                                           | Resource                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Development and validation of the CSWI          | Furlong, M. J., O'Malley, M., Chan, M-K., Dowdy, E., Goodwin, J., Ortiz, A., Nylund-Gibson, K., & Hanson, T. (2025). Development, validation, and multitier applications with the California Student Wellness Index. <i>Contemporary School Psychology</i> . |
| The CoVitality principle and SEHS               | Available at <a href="https://www.covitalityucsb.info">www.covitalityucsb.info</a>                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Mental health screening in schools              | School Mental Health Collaborative: <a href="https://smhcollaborative.org/resources/">smhcollaborative.org/resources/</a>                                                                                                                                    |
| MTSS frameworks                                 | California Department of Education MTSS resources: <a href="https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/mtsscomprti2.asp">www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/mtsscomprti2.asp</a>                                                                                                   |
| CalSCHLS and the California Healthy Kids Survey | <a href="https://www.calschls.org/">www.calschls.org/</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                    |