

BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL: Efforts to Improve Postsecondary Transitions Through Linked Learning

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More than 20,000 students in California participate in Linked Learning, an approach to high school redesign that transforms the traditional high school experience by integrating rigorous academics with real-world technical skills, workplace experiences, and wraparound support services for students. Evidence suggests that the Linked Learning approach is increasing the percentage of students who graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education with the knowledge and skills that will prepare them for the twenty-first century.¹

This paper highlights how Linked Learning supports students' transition from high school to postsecondary education. The paper does so by describing the efforts and outcomes of one school district, two high schools in different school districts, and a regional program that are all implementing Linked Learning. In addition, the paper summarizes the postsecondary findings of two studies on Linked Learning. The paper concludes with recommendations for state and federal policy.

LINKED LEARNING IS INCREASING THE PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL AND ENROLL IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION WITH THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS THAT WILL PREPARE THEM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.



THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Employment projections for the United States point to a growing need for a highly skilled and better-educated workforce. By 2020, two-thirds of the nation's jobs will require at least some postsecondary education,² but estimates indicate that the nation will fall short by as many as five million qualified workers.³

Much of the shortfall is attributable to a leaky education pipeline that spans from cradle to career. Of the 80 percent of students who graduated from high school on time in 2012,⁴ only 66 percent enrolled in a two- or four-year program the following fall.⁵ Further, on average, only 31 percent of students at a two-year institution earn a degree or certificate in three years, while only 59 percent of students at a four-year institution finish in six years.⁶

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59%

Elements of Linked Learning

Linked Learning combines four elements grounded in research:

- **Rigorous academics:** An academic core that includes college-preparatory English, mathematics, science, history, and foreign language courses for all students.
- **Real-world technical skills:** A challenging career-based component of three or more courses to help students gain the knowledge and skills that will give them a head start on a successful career.
- **Work-based learning:** A series of work-based learning opportunities that begin with mentoring and job shadowing and evolve into intensive internships, school-based enterprises, or virtual apprenticeships.
- **Personalized support:** Services including counseling and supplemental instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics that help students master academic and technical learning.

Source: The James Irvine Foundation's Linked Learning overview, online at <http://irvine.org/grantmaking/our-programs/youth/linked-learning>.

Numerous factors contribute to the leaks in the pipeline. Students are often ill-prepared for entry into postsecondary education because of poor alignment between high school and postsecondary expectations.⁷ Most students have limited access to counseling and other support to develop pathways that align with their career interests and talents, or to help them navigate the admissions process.⁸ And rising costs continue to put higher education out of reach for more Americans each year.⁹

THE PROMISE OF LINKED LEARNING

Linked Learning is a promising educational strategy designed to plug many of the leaks in the pipeline. Based in California, the Linked Learning approach connects rigorous academic, technical, and workplace learning in order to improve high school graduation rates and increase the number of students who successfully transition to and through postsecondary education. Linked Learning is delivered through so-called pathways that are based on one of California's fifteen major industry

sectors, such as health sciences, information technology, or manufacturing. The pathways can be implemented in various educational settings using different models, including career academies or small/themed schools.¹⁰

In just four years, students attending one of the first nine districts¹¹ to implement Linked Learning were making greater progress toward graduation and college eligibility than comparison students. Linked Learning students were earning more credits in the first two years of high school and were more likely to be on track to complete the course requirements for admission into the University of California and California State University systems, known as "a-g requirements."¹²

As the examples that follow will highlight, there are multiple ways to execute this systemic approach. To illustrate this point, the paper describes Linked Learning implementation across different levels—at the school district, at the school site, and at a regional education complex—each of which shows promise and supports students in transitioning to postsecondary education.

Porterville Unified School District (Porterville, CA)

Porterville Unified School District (PUSD) began implementing Linked Learning in 2009 and is intentional about supporting the connection between high school and postsecondary education. The work of PUSD is particularly noteworthy because it provides an example of systemic reform that is implemented through effective partnerships with industry and higher education, serving a rural population. Of the 14,020 students served by PUSD, 86 percent are socioeconomically disadvantaged and 79 percent are Hispanic. English learners comprise 25 percent of the district's students.¹³

PUSD has convened the Porterville Pathways Coalition, which includes representatives from local industry and institutions of higher education that support the district's system of Linked Learning pathways. For example, higher education institutions such as California State University, Fresno, and Porterville College have formed partnerships with the district to put in place a credentialing process for teachers that will take on teaching assignments in Linked Learning pathways, as well as a forthcoming dual enrollment program to provide an opportunity for Linked Learning students to graduate from high school having completed three college courses.

The systemic ties between high school and postsecondary education facilitated at the district level are reinforced by efforts at the building level to

develop a college-going culture. At Harmony Magnet, for example, staff members work with students to navigate the college application and financial aid processes. Harmony alumni are routinely invited to return to the high school to share their postsecondary experiences with current students and encourage them to graduate. At Granite Hills High School, monthly workshops are run by college students to help the high school students prepare for the application process and college interviews. The workshops provide high school students with concrete examples of college success that they can relate to.

The impact of PUSD's efforts is evident in student outcomes. For the Class of 2012, graduation rates in Porterville for all students and for student subgroups are higher than the state average. The high school graduation rate in Porterville for English learners, for example, was 10 percentage points higher than at the state level (72 percent versus 62 percent).¹⁴ Outcomes comparing students participating in Linked Learning pathways with their peers within Porterville are also impressive: Linked Learning students in Monache High School's Multimedia Tech Academy, for example, have a postsecondary enrollment rate that is 8 percentage points higher than their peers (32 percent versus 24 percent), and a persistence rate that is 24 percentage points higher than their peers (67 percent versus 43 percent).¹⁵

The high school graduation rate in Porterville for English learners was 10 percentage points higher than at the state level (72 percent versus 62 percent).

Dozier-Libby Medical High School (Antioch, CA)

Dozier-Libby Medical High School (DLMHS), in Antioch, serves nearly 640 students; 80 percent are students of color, and 51 percent are economically disadvantaged.²¹ Approximately 30 percent of the students' parents do not have more than a high school diploma.²² A case study of student-centered practices at DLMHS found that 97 percent of Linked Learning students from the Class of 2012 graduated on time, and 96 percent completed the a-g course requirements. These figures are in stark contrast to the state and district averages—79 percent and 66 percent, respectively—and even hold steady for economically disadvantaged students (97 percent).²³ Moreover, 93 percent of graduates were still enrolled in postsecondary education midway through their freshman year (53 percent in a two-year program, 45 percent in a four-year program, and 2 percent in a career tech training program).²⁴ In a follow-up survey of this group, students enrolled in postsecondary education reported high passage rates in their courses, the majority indicated that they were planning

to return for a second year, and half had already declared a health or science major.²⁵

When looking specifically at the student-centered practices at DLMHS—such as rich and relevant curricula, engaging pedagogy that addresses individual student needs, authentic assessments, instructional supports, and personalization²⁶—researchers found that teachers were committed and caring, and students felt a sense of belonging and felt that their voices were heard.²⁷ A strong emphasis on college for all was also cited.²⁸ Seventy-eight percent of Linked Learning students at DLMHS reported that school officials helped them to understand the college admissions process, compared to only 47 percent of students at comparison schools.²⁹ Eighty-one percent felt that DLMHS helped them develop the study skills they will need in college, and 76 percent reported that the school helped them to learn about or practice college entrance or placement exams—challenges often cited by students trying to successfully transition from high school to college.³⁰

Center for Advanced Research and Technology (Clovis, CA)

The Center for Advanced Research and Technology (CART) is a regional program located in Clovis, and currently serves approximately 1,400 eleventh- and twelfth-grade students, 60 percent of whom are students of color.¹⁶ The students attending CART come from fifteen different high schools in one of two partner districts—Clovis and Fresno Unified School Districts. Students attend CART for half-day classes in career-focused laboratories that target one of four broad industry categories: professional sciences,

engineering, advanced communications, and global economics.

According to CART, students who participate in the digital media and graphic design lab, for example, “develop skills in communication and message design including color, typography, and design principles ... Design students work on all stages of production using industry-standard software (i.e., Adobe Master Collection) to create original products such as logos,

posters, newspapers, advertisements, websites, and two-dimensional animation.”¹⁷ Students are taught by teams of educators that include business mentors who interact directly with students onsite or as part of an offsite internship experience.¹⁸ According to recent

figures, approximately 80 percent of CART graduates go on to a four-year program, a two-year program, or a technical school.¹⁹ These numbers mirror findings from a long-term analysis dating back to 2002.²⁰

Life Academy of Health and Bioscience (Oakland, CA)

Student-centered practices were also examined at Life Academy of Health and Bioscience (Life Academy), part of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD).³¹ Life Academy serves roughly 275 students, who participate in one of three pathways focused on health professions (medicine, health, and biotechnology).³² Nearly all of the students at Life Academy are economically disadvantaged (99 percent), half of the students’ parents did not complete high school, and nearly one-third are English learners.³³ Like DLMHS and CART, Life Academy boasts impressive student outcomes: the school has the highest percentage of graduates (87 percent) who meet the a-g requirements in the district.³⁴

All students at Life Academy participate in a career-focused internship in eleventh and twelfth grade, an advisory program that spans four years, and a ritual called “firewalk” that gives peers the opportunity

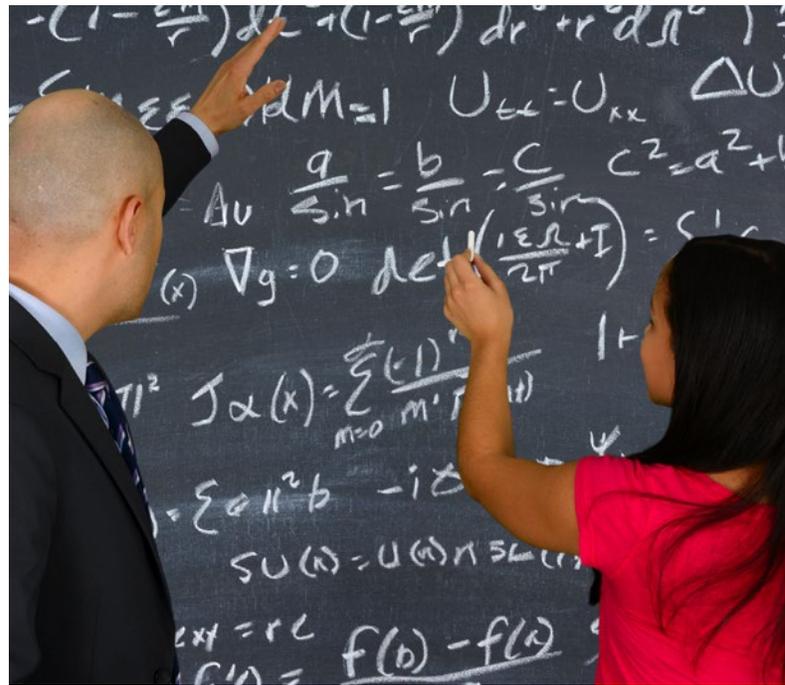
to weigh in on whether or not a student is ready to move on to the eleventh grade—all experiences that graduates say contributed to their college readiness.³⁵ The school embeds habits of mind (effective communication, professionalism, perspectives, evidence, logical reasoning, and analysis) and habits of work (focus and precision, organization, revision, cooperation, and effort) into the academic program, and assesses the habits using what Life Academy refers to as “certifications” and “defenses.”³⁶ The certification is a benchmark assessment that is embedded into each academic course to gauge the habits of work, while the defense, which occurs in grades ten and twelve, measures understanding of content and habits of mind.³⁷ Twelfth grade also includes a yearlong senior research paper, cited by graduates as an important and rigorous activity that helped them to feel prepared for college.³⁸

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LINKED LEARNING EVALUATIONS

A comprehensive evaluation of the California Linked Learning District Initiative³⁹ found that in most districts the teachers in the Linked Learning pathway played an active role in postsecondary guidance, helping students to better understand and navigate the process. Pathway teachers advised students on high school graduation requirements, counseled them on postsecondary options (both college and careers), instructed them on how to select a two- or four-year college, and assisted with many other activities that a traditional guidance counselor is responsible for but could not perform due to competing responsibilities.⁴⁰ In surveys across the Linked Learning districts, Linked Learning students also reported that their high school experience “helped them develop the productive dispositions and behaviors conducive to engagement and success in school and postsecondary endeavors” in areas such as time management, personal accountability, and the value and effort of hard work.⁴¹

Another study found that students who attended Linked Learning high schools graduated at higher rates than students statewide, and that alumni were more likely to attend a postsecondary institution than not attend.⁴² While



enrollment in community college was similar for Linked Learning students and comparison group respondents (40 percent for both), Linked Learning students were more likely to be enrolled in a four-year program (43 percent versus 34 percent).⁴³ Linked Learning students were also more likely to report job training outside of school (22 percent versus 15 percent), a key element of the Linked Learning approach.⁴⁴

Although implementation is still in the early stages at some sites, these and other evaluations point to the promise of the approach in preparing students for college, a career, and life—even in the case of the most at-risk student populations in California.

LINKED LEARNING IS PREPARING STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE, A CAREER, AND LIFE, EVEN IN THE CASE OF THE MOST AT-RISK STUDENT POPULATIONS IN CALIFORNIA.

TAKING LINKED LEARNING TO SCALE

Linked Learning has grown from nine school districts to an additional sixty-three sites in California, and recently expanded into Texas and Michigan. The promising results from the initiative resulted in the California state legislature providing significant support to expand Linked Learning beyond the original nine districts, including the following legislation:

- **Assembly Bill 790.** Signed into law in October 2011, AB 790 established the Linked Learning Pilot Program, a state initiative administered by the California Department of Education (CDE) to expand systemic, districtwide strategies for delivering Linked Learning.⁴⁵ Sixty-three sites from across the state were selected in January 2013 following an application and review process administered by the CDE.⁴⁶ Once fully implemented, the pilot program will expand the reach of Linked Learning to more than one-third of the state's high school students.⁴⁷
- **California Career Pathways Trust.** The 2013–14 state budget included \$250 million for the California Career Pathways Trust (CCPT), a competitive grant program administered by the CDE to develop a “work-based learning infrastructure, innovative regional partnerships for career pathway support, and the expansion and improvement of career pathway programs statewide.”⁴⁸ While bolstering the Linked Learning approach, the CCPT also shines a spotlight on the importance of secondary/community college alignment and regional strategies. Eligible applicants include community colleges, local education agencies, and charter schools. The CCPT funds pathways from kindergarten through grade fourteen.⁴⁹ In May of 2014, thirty-nine consortia, representing hundreds of thousands of students, were awarded grants.⁵⁰ On the heels of the award announcement, the legislature and governor agreed to include a second infusion of \$250 million in the state budget for the CCPT.

HOW STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY CAN SUPPORT LINKED LEARNING AND THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

State Policy

California has made high school reform a priority and is using the Linked Learning approach to drive many of their efforts. Other states should consider adopting a similar approach. Through such measures as AB 790 and the California Career Pathways Trust, state policy can facilitate the integration of college and career preparation and increase the number of students who transition into postsecondary education.

State accountability systems can also provide incentives for reform efforts such as Linked Learning that provide college- and career-ready pathways toward postsecondary education. States should use the renewal of state waivers under the Department of Education's (ED) Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Policy as an opportunity to incorporate college- and career-ready indicators into their accountability systems. States should be encouraged to develop and utilize indicators that integrate college and career readiness, such as the successful completion of both a rigorous college-ready curriculum and an industry-recognized credential.

States should also facilitate the development of integrated career/technical courses and academic courses. Such courses should meet requirements for state college admission requirements, while also being part of a career and technical education (CTE) pathway sequence. This would reduce course overload for students who take both academic and CTE courses, while increasing student engagement and providing young people with the opportunity for hands-on learning.

In addition to the integration of CTE and core academics, states should work toward greater integration of high school and postsecondary education. This can take place through expanded dual enrollment programs, as well as revisions to state-level grant programs to include a greater focus on the transition between high school and postsecondary education. This could include an increased focus on college and career counseling, strengthening financial aid literacy for high school students, summer bridge programs, accelerated remediation, support for twelfth-grade FAFSA completion, and similar strategies.

Federal Policy

President Obama has requested \$150 million to implement a new High School Redesign program. This initiative would provide grants to partnerships among school districts, employers, and institutions of higher education to transform the high school experience and create effective pathways to postsecondary education. Congress should fund this important proposal.⁵¹

School Improvement Grants (SIG) provide another opportunity to support effective high school reform. Currently, recipients of SIG grants must implement one of

four school reform models outlined by ED. As ED revises its regulations on the SIG program,⁵³ it should incorporate a school reform model that focuses on the specific needs of high schools. This model should explicitly allow districts to use SIG funds to implement Linked Learning.

In addition, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions passed a bill to reauthorize ESEA that incorporated the Pathways to College program.⁵³ This program would support effective secondary school reform strategies, including approaches such as Linked Learning that connect the high school experience to the needs of high-growth, high-demand industries and support students' transition from high school to postsecondary education. Congress should reauthorize ESEA and include the Pathways to College program.

Finally, the reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act provides a critical opportunity to advance high school reform and improve student transitions from high school to postsecondary education. Congress should use the reauthorization as an opportunity to integrate CTE into the larger academic experience of high school students, rather than having it conducted as an isolated enterprise. This can be achieved by emphasizing collaboration between academic and CTE teachers around professional development, curriculum development, and instruction. In addition, programs of study should be conceived as broad career pathways, including a comprehensive array of core academic courses, CTE, work-based learning, and student support services. The reauthorization should also strengthen the connection between secondary and postsecondary education through such means as including rates of postsecondary remediation as a performance indicator, ensuring the transferability of dual or concurrent enrollment credit, and requiring the use of funds to support career, academic, and financial aid counseling.⁵⁴



CONCLUSION

The nation's economy depends on the ability of the education system to more effectively produce students who graduate from high school ready for college and a career. Building from decades of practice and research, outcomes point to the promise of the Linked Learning approach to plug many of the decades-old leaks in the education pipeline. By engaging students in meaningful learning experiences and providing direct support to students in bridging the gap between high school and postsecondary education, the Linked Learning approach has led to impressive outcomes across California. Policymakers nationwide would be wise to learn from the California experience as they seek to prepare the nation's students for the twenty-first century.



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The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. www.all4ed.org

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ENDNOTES

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