A Fact Sheet on Linked Learning

California's high schools are not working for large numbers of young people. Almost a third of new ninth-graders drop out before graduating. Another third finish high school but lack the academic and technical readiness to succeed in college or career. Only a third of high school students in California graduate on time and transition easily to postsecondary education and lasting career success.

Linked Learning offers a promising approach to improving high schools while also addressing actual needs in our state's economy. It provides a challenging vehicle that inspires students to learn and gives students access to education that is both rigorous and relevant. The great promise of pathways is the ability to make learning real and exciting for the thousands of students who are bored with conventional high school curricula. Whether they aspire to become doctors or medical technicians, architects or carpenters, all students hunger for the answer to a simple question: "Why do I need to learn this?"

What Is Linked Learning?

Linked Learning transforms students' high school experience by bringing together strong academics, demanding career and technical education, and real-world experience to help students gain an advantage in high school, postsecondary education, and careers. Students follow industry-themed pathways, choosing among fields such as engineering, arts and media, or biomedicine and health.

Guiding Principles

1. Pathways prepare students for postsecondary education and career—both objectives, not just one or the other.
2. Pathways lead to a full range of postsecondary and career opportunities by eliminating tracking and keeping all options open after high school.
3. Pathways connect academics to real-world applications by integrating challenging academics with a demanding technical curriculum.
4. Pathways improve student achievement.

Core Components

1. A challenging academic component prepares students for success—without remediation—in postsecondary programs. Pathways complement traditional learning with project-based instruction that links to real-world applications.
2. A demanding technical component delivers concrete knowledge and skills through a cluster of three or more technical courses.
3. A work-based learning component offers opportunities to learn through real-world experiences that enhance classroom instruction.
4. Support services include counseling and transportation as well as additional instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics to help students succeed with a challenging program of study.

Participation in Linked Learning prepares students to graduate from high school and succeed in a full range of postsecondary options—including two- or four-year colleges, certification programs, apprenticeships, military service, or formal job training. There is no one right way to implement a pathway. But whatever the strategy, each pathway embraces four guiding principles and four core components.
Linked Learning Essential Elements

Student Outcomes-Driven Practice

The progress of every student toward achieving measurable and consequential learning outcomes is the driving purpose for the pathway community of practice. The pathway team regularly reviews several kinds of evidence including: (1) performance-based measures of pathway-specific student learning outcomes; (2) information on students' level of performance, available from student information systems; (3) individual student growth in performance, both on pathway-specific learning outcomes and on transcript-based measures; (4) students' success after high school in postsecondary education and employment, if available; and (5) trends over time in all these measures for the pathway students as a group. The team uses data on a monthly basis to inform and improve professional practice, and on an annual basis to revise the pathway improvement plan.

Equity, Access and Achievement

A Linked Learning pathway pursues both excellence and equity as mutual goals. A pathway establishes high achievement expectations for all students and practices non-discriminatory and inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogy. The pathway is equitably accessible to and serves well any interested student, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, special needs, or prior academic achievement. An equity-focused pathway intentionally reflects the diversity and strengths of its school, community, and district, and the grouping of its students is heterogeneous, flexible, and equitable.

Program of Study

An industry-themed pathway program of study brings coherence to the four core components of Linked Learning: rigorous academics, real-world technical skills, work-based learning, and personalized supports. It intentionally coordinates and sequences student learning experiences in a way that integrates rigorous academic and technical core curricula. The pathway theme is broad enough to appeal to and engage all students. The program of study maximizes cohort scheduling to ensure that all pathway students are offered the opportunity to earn postsecondary credit and are prepared for success in the full range of postsecondary options.

Learning and Teaching

Pathway students engage in inquiry- and project-based learning that is outcome-focused, rigorous, relevant, and collaborative. Members of the pathway community of practice plan such learning experiences for students: they regularly collaborate to develop and articulate standards-aligned grade-level, course, and project outcomes to organize the pathway's program of study and guide assessment, curricular, and instructional planning. They also use performance assessment tasks with common rubrics to assess, monitor, and support every student's progress toward mastery of college and career ready pathway learning outcomes. The community of practice regularly engages in professional learning, evidence-based inquiry, and reflection to continuously improve their practice.

Work-Based Learning (WBL)

All students participate in a personalized and coordinated continuum of work-based-learning (WBL) experiences designed to help them master and demonstrate academic, technical, and 21st Century skills, as identified in the pathway student learning outcomes. WBL builds on and extends every pathway's program of study. WBL occurs in-person and online: in the workplace, the community, and at school. Students acquire academic, technical, and 21st Century knowledge and skills through WBL, all of which enhance their preparedness for the demands of college and careers.

Personalized Student Support
Every pathway student is supported by pathway staff, partners, and families. The pathway community of practice tailors learning experiences to students' individual developmental needs, skills, strengths, interests, and aspirations. Pathway staff, in consultation with families and service providers, identify and address the academic, personal, and social-emotional needs of every student so that she or he makes progress toward achieving personalized college and career goals and pathway student learning outcomes.

Pathway Leadership and Partnerships

The pathway staff, school and district leaders, and partners share responsibility for program effectiveness and accountability for student outcomes. These stakeholders assure that conditions are in place to establish and sustain pathway quality. The pathway engages a formal advisory board that serves as an organizing structure to effectively engage a core of stakeholders, including business, postsecondary, and community partners.