Linked Learning

Using Learning Time Creatively to Prepare Students for College and Career

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Introduction and summary

American public education is in a constant state of experimentation, with new waves of reforms and education initiatives unveiled routinely—many recycled and some reinvented. Yet few are truly innovative. The newest and most promising reform thus far are the Common Core State Standards, which are rigorous standards in English language arts and mathematics implemented in elementary through high school. These standards require new approaches to teaching and learning that ensure all students are adequately prepared for postsecondary education and careers without the need for remediation.

New standards certainly offer new challenges; but they also provide new opportunities to fundamentally change the American public education system. This can be especially transformative for traditionally underserved students who historically have been ill prepared for life after high school, as evidenced by student achievement data for these students. The 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that only 26 percent of the nation’s 12th-grade students are proficient or advanced in mathematics, and only 38 percent are proficient or advanced in reading. For African American and Hispanic students, the numbers are even more dismal: African American students scored the lowest of all subgroups at 7 percent proficiency in math and 16 percent in reading, while Hispanic students scored 12 percent in math and 23 percent in reading. These data are not only disheartening but also signify the incredibly challenging task of ensuring that student success is at the center of every reform initiative and policy decision going forward.

A California-led initiative called Linked Learning offers a promising systemic approach to reform that is designed to address these challenges and has been touted as a suitable complement to implementing the Common Core State Standards. As this report will describe, the Linked Learning approach includes multiple elements that provide high school students with a rigorous academic core and hands-on real world learning experiences that prepare students for both college and careers. As we will explain below, high school reform strategies such as Linked Learning require the intentional and strategic use of time to accomplish ambitious goals that result in positive outcomes for students who are traditionally underserved.
This report highlights the efforts of high schools implementing multiple Linked Learning pathways in the Los Angeles Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, Porterville Unified School District, and Sacramento Unified School District. Each of these pathways has reconfigured the use of time in order to provide students with a more effective learning experience. Building on the lessons learned from these districts, as well as our collective expertise in high school reform and high-quality increased learning time, the Center for American Progress and the Alliance for Excellent Education make the following recommendations, which are explained in greater detail at the end of this report:

• Districts should give schools the flexibility to redesign their master schedules so that teachers and students have the necessary time to implement effective approaches to high school reform such as Linked Learning.

• Learning from the California experience, states should enact high school reform policy to provide effective college and career pathways for students.

• The reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, specifically Title II, Part A should clearly articulate that funds may be used for common planning time and professional development between career and technical education, or CTE, and academic teachers.

• Congress should increase funding and flexibility for 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

• Congress should fund the Obama administration’s proposal for a high school redesign program that includes support for the more strategic use of time.

• The U.S. Department of Education should increase resources and technical support to ensure high-quality implementation of increased learning time in School Improvement Grant schools.

• States should reform funding policies, whether through general funds or categorical programs, to permit and incentivize schools to more creatively use time.
What is the Linked Learning approach?

Implemented at the high school level, Linked Learning is a blend of core academic content with technical education and real-world applications. Linked Learning brings together both college and career preparation to ensure that students have a suite of complementary skills that will set them up for success in any postsecondary endeavor. There are four integrated elements that make up the Linked Learning approach:

• A rigorous academic core with the goal of preparing students for postsecondary education and employment without the need for remediation

• A technical core of three or more courses that help students gain the knowledge and skills needed for the workplace

• A series of work-based learning opportunities that begin with mentoring or job shadowing and evolve into internships or apprenticeships

• Student support services such as counseling and supplemental instruction that help students master advanced academic and technical content

California’s Linked Learning approach was implemented in 2008 in response to the fact that nearly one-third of underrepresented students of color were not graduating high school in four years. Research has found that students participating in a Linked Learning pathway—subsequently referred to as “pathway students”—are earning more credits toward graduation, graduating at higher rates, and enrolling in colleges at higher rates than their peers.

The Linked Learning approach requires students and educators to perform a myriad of tasks that do not neatly fit within the confines of a traditional school day. To realize the full potential of Linked Learning, many districts and schools are using time more creatively and expanding learning time to provide students with the full array of college- and career-ready opportunities embedded within the approach.
Why increased learning time?

The shift to increased learning time in U.S. public schools is already underway: More than 1,500 schools have significantly lengthened their school day, week, or year. Many schools have made the wise decision to significantly lengthen the school day, as there is growing research suggesting that more time in school can increase student achievement, particularly for students who attend high-poverty underperforming schools. A meta-analysis of the effects of longer school days or years on achievement found that adding time to the school day or year was associated with improved student outcomes, noting stronger effects for schools serving large populations of traditionally underserved students.

To be clear, more time in school alone will not automatically guarantee a rise in student achievement. As noted in a recent industry report on school turnaround, successful expanded learning-time schools—which represent a way of increasing learning time and opportunities for students—are not simply “adding time to compensate for what they lack: they are integrating time into an overall model for successful teaching and learning.”

Some Linked Learning high schools lengthen the school day and year and use time before school, after school, and during the summer to provide more learning time for students and teachers. For some high-poverty schools, however, significantly lengthening the school day is not an option. In these cases, schools should look at using existing time more effectively. Many high schools implementing the Linked Learning approach work within the existing structure of the school day to partner with community-based organizations and local businesses and colleges to provide students with relevant, real-world experiences within the traditional school day.

Linked Learning and the effective use of time during a traditional school day

Some schools implementing the Linked Learning approach are incorporating multiple learning elements within the parameters of traditional scheduling. Research suggests that the strongest Linked Learning pathways break down barriers to implementation of the four components of the approach. In some cases, this means schools operate on a seven-period day or block scheduling, which is when there are longer classes, but not necessarily every day. A recent evaluation of Linked Learning, for example, found that it is essential to have “a
supportive master schedule that allows for pure student cohorts that spend all of or almost all of their school day moving through classes together.” This evaluation also found that high-quality Linked Learning pathways had master collaborative schedules in place that included common planning time for pathway staff and “cohort purity,” which is when student cohorts move from class to class together throughout the year. This means that the groups of students who are in health care pathways, for example, will all have access to the same college- and career-preparation courses. This further personalizes the learning experience as students consistently engage with their pathway peers and teachers.

Well-implemented Linked Learning pathways allow for creative scheduling that benefits teachers as well. An Education Trust-West report examining systematic interventions in Linked Learning schools found that “teachers at most of the schools reported that having longer blocks of time to teach courses—along with an advisory period—enables them to provide all students with additional learning opportunities and personalized attention.” An independent evaluation of Linked Learning conducted by SRI International found that “without a schedule that allows for common planning, teachers do not have the time and space to build a pathway program together, and do not experience Linked Learning as a cohort.”

Some high schools implementing the Linked Learning approach have lengthened the school day. As stated later in this report, some of these schools have School Improvement Grants, or SIGs. SIG funds require schools to increase the amount of time that students spend focused on core academics and enrichment, while also providing teachers with more time for planning, collaboration, and professional development. As noted in the Education Trust-West report, many pathways use additional learning time to help educators identify struggling students early on and to provide them with diverse support systems based on their needs in order to more effectively serve them. For example, remediation in Linked Learning schools might include web-based recovery courses, before- and after-school courses, tutoring, mentoring, and an advisory period to help students meet achievement baselines. This is in sharp contrast to the approach taken by traditional California high schools, where remediation usually consists of forcing students to retake courses with few opportunities for additional interventions.

This report features four school districts representing multiple Linked Learning pathways in various districts in California—the Los Angeles Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, Porterville Unified School District, and Sacramento Unified School District. Five schools are highlighted, where the students are disproportionately students of color and low-income students.
These districts and schools have used a variety of methods to achieve more and better learning time for students and teachers. The most common approaches found were: an expanded school day; out-of-school learning time, such as before- and after-school programs; summer learning; common planning time and professional learning; and work-based learning. Below are insights into how some of California’s Linked Learning schools and districts are applying their mission of college and career readiness for all students by increasing learning opportunities through their strategic use of time.