

OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Engaging a Community that Contributes to Linked Learning Success

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has committed itself to meaningful community engagement and public will building around its use of the Linked Learning approach to drive educational improvement. The community, in turn, has made clear that it is committed to the district’s success. [Measure N](#), a parcel tax passed by Oakland voters in 2014, provides roughly \$850 per student per year over a 10-year period to support the district’s integration of “...challenging academics with career-based learning and real-world work experiences” for students. OUSD has already shown the community that these resources are being put to good use. The district has seen the overall graduation rate for its study body improve considerably, from 59.3% in 2011–12 to 72.6% in 2018–19, since implementing Linked Learning in all high schools. However, it is not just Measure N that funds OUSD’s Linked Learning efforts. The district also draws on other state, federal, and philanthropic funds. Additionally, OUSD has enacted board policies to establish its ongoing commitment to an integrated approach to college and career preparation. This case study provides insights about the governance and funding structures OUSD has put in place to ensure Linked Learning thrives in its community.

Figure 1: OUSD Demographic, Pathway, and Performance Data (2019–2020)

Total Students Grades 9–12	Number of Pathways in District	Graduation Rate	11 th Grade Smarter Balanced Standardized Test Performance		Graduates Meeting A–G Course Requirements for UC/CSU Admission
			30.34% meet or exceed standards in ELA	13.1% meet or exceed standards in math	
14,412	33 as Silver certified	72%	30.34% meet or exceed standards in ELA	13.1% meet or exceed standards in math	36%

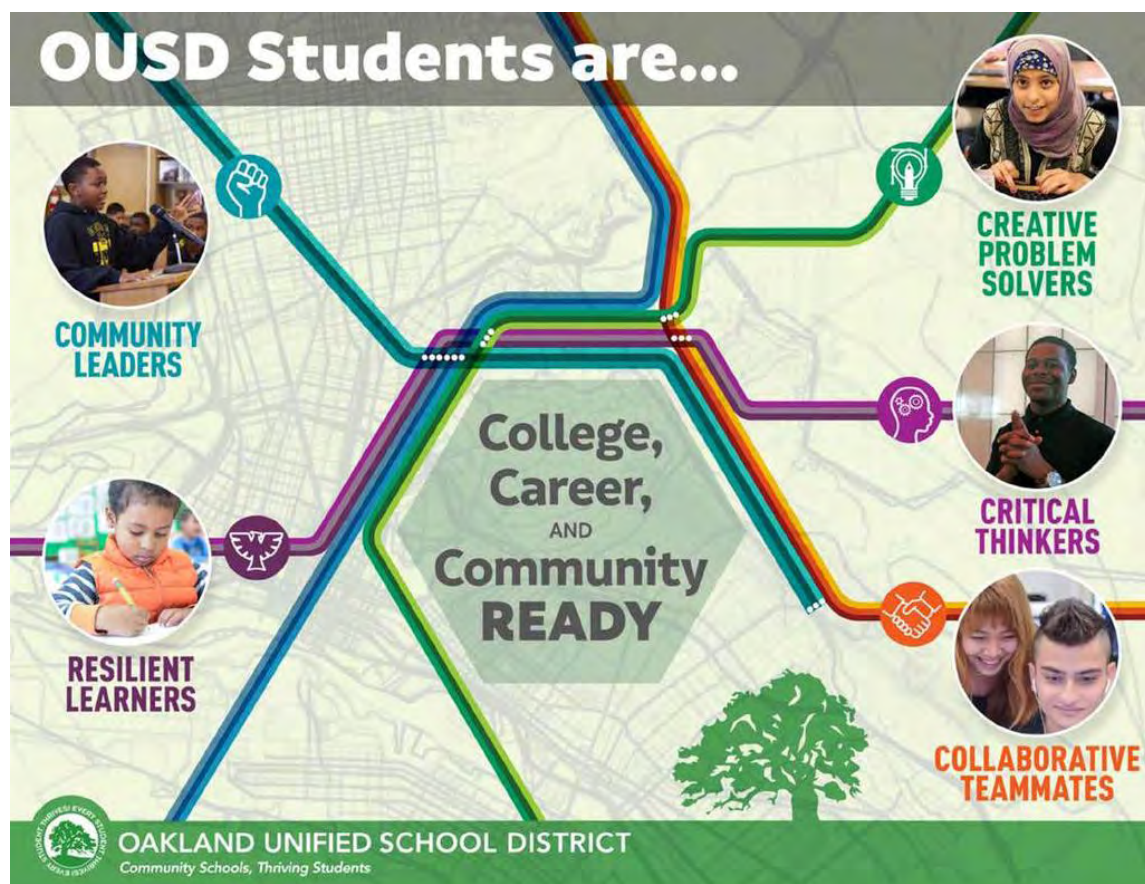
African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Filipino	Hispanic or Latino	Pacific Islander	White	Two or More Races	Not Reported
22.3%	0.31%	12.5%	1.02%	51.01%	0.91%	7.88%	2.65%	1.39%

Source: Dataquest

PURSUING THE GOAL OF LINKED LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

OUSD participated in the 2009 California Linked Learning District Initiative, funded by The James Irvine Foundation, which piloted Linked Learning across nine California school districts. Since 2009, OUSD has continued to build out its integrated pathway structure and currently serves over 14,000 high school students across 33 Linked Learning pathways that are Silver certified through the Linked Learning Alliance.¹ OUSD's strategic plan identifies the goal of having 80% of high school students and 100% of sophomores participating in Linked Learning pathways." The plan specifically emphasizes the rigorous academic component of Linked Learning, stating: "Each Linked Learning pathway will require students to take college-level Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and/or Dual Enrollment courses while providing support to students who need additional help in meeting college and career-level expectations." In alignment with the strategic plan, the district's graduate profile aims for all students to be "college, career, and community ready" (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: OUSD Graduate Profile



¹ Linked Learning Certification establishes clear standards for implementing the approach with fidelity. Schools with certified pathways show their dedication to continual improvement, unlock real benefits for students, and are recognized for excellence.

To maintain the district's pathways and ensure that students will be ready for a successful trajectory, OUSD has:

- Adopted policies that support Linked Learning
- Taken a systemic approach to navigating financially challenging times to ensure pathways persist
- Utilized local parcel tax funds to fund pathways
- Tapped into local philanthropic funding to advance pathway innovations
- Used a “braided funding” strategy at both the district and school levels to pay for Linked Learning expenses

DISTRICT POLICIES THAT ENSURE INTEGRATED COLLEGE AND CAREER PREPARATION FOR STUDENTS

Board policies and administrative rules institutionalize the district's commitment to support Linked Learning. These policies and rules also support district decision making by documenting the district's priorities around college and career preparation.

Board policies and administrative rules provide publicly available guidance to advance local decision making in support of pathways.

Oakland has a board policy that states: “In order to maximize the learning and application of skills that will allow students to succeed in life... academic and vocational subjects should be combined and fully integrated during all their years of schooling.”² The policy goes on to identify the importance of work-based learning opportunities and of career awareness, exploration, and guidance within the curriculum. This policy is supported by an accompanying administrative rule that lays out ways for the district to integrate academics into vocational education. Another board policy articulates the necessary integration of academic and vocational educational components.³ Specifically, it states:

The Governing Board desires to provide a quality, expanded and modernized vocational and technical education program which provides services and activities that are of sufficient size, scope and quality to be effective. The goal of the program is to provide for an integration of academic and vocational components through a coherent sequence of courses to ensure learning in all subjects. The program shall also provide curriculum and program strategies reflecting workplace needs.

The board's policies are aligned with and support Linked Learning, and they cement the district's commitment to an integrated approach to college and career preparation.

² Oakland Board Policy 6030

³ Oakland Board Policy 6178

DISTRICT FUNDING PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINING PATHWAYS

OUSD uses a systemic and strategic approach to funding pathways, which ensures that pathways can be sustained even in times of financial challenges.

OUSD has embraced a systemic approach to funding pathways. During good economic times, the district focuses on how to use all available funding sources to provide the best high school experience systemwide, regardless of the school students attend, or which pathways they participate in. During economically challenging times, OUSD maintains that systemwide approach. Even in times when cuts have been required, those cuts have not been departmentalized. Rather, the district takes a holistic view and takes into account what needs to be done to ensure high-quality pathways persist. In a recent example, the district had to consider its approach to the proposed cuts to categorical funds in the 2020–2021 May revision to the state budget. Specifically, OUSD considered ways to help teachers continue to transition to virtual learning in their pathways during the pandemic in the face of potential cuts. Although the proposed cuts in the May revision were not ultimately enacted, if they had been, OUSD would have responded with a strategy that prioritizes the system’s, and ultimately students’, success. One such strategy the district considered was to shift dollars from the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act to extend contracts for Perkins-eligible CTE teachers to develop modules that could be used in the future for distance learning. However, no across-the-board cuts would have been considered. The central idea behind OUSD’s decision-making process is that pathways represent the way OUSD “does high school.” The district’s policies have made this commitment clear—regardless of the status of the economy.

OUSD utilizes a local parcel tax to provide significant pathway funding.

As noted above, [Measure N](#) provides roughly \$850 per student, with 90% of funds going directly to schools. This parcel tax allows OUSD to support its Linked Learning pathways while being less reliant on state funds than are other districts. OUSD indicates that the purpose of the measure is “to pay for the implementation of a comprehensive approach to high school education in Oakland. This approach integrates challenging academics with career-based learning and real-world work experiences. It also creates small learning communities of career-oriented pathways, and offers intensive, individualized support to create the conditions for all students to succeed after graduation” and for high schools “to create customized plans to place all students in high-performing career pathways.”⁴

⁴ <https://www.ousd.org/domain/5444>

On its district website, [OUSD explains](#) that Measure N funds are used to:

- Reduce the drop-out rate
- Provide high school students with real-world work and learning opportunities
- Prepare students for admission to the University of California and other four-year colleges
- Expand mentoring, tutoring, counseling, support services, and transition to job training programs

OUSD also uses state funds, like the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), for a number of staff positions, including teachers and school and district leaders. However, multiple pathway expenses are supported primarily or exclusively through Measure N funding. These include support for designated CTE teachers at school sites, staffing parity initiatives across sites to ensure schools have access to counselors and assistant principals, along with materials, equipment, and supplemental textbooks for school sites, and collaborative retreats for teacher teams.

Philanthropic funding promotes innovation.

Private funds, including philanthropic dollars, can differ from public dollars, such as state and federal grants, in that they may have fewer restrictions on what they can be used for when supporting programs. In OUSD, philanthropy funds the district's innovation efforts. For example, grants from Salesforce and the Walter & Elise Haas Fund support programs that promote new educational approaches, like offering computer science at the middle school level. These programs provide younger students with technical skills that can set them up for future success in the district's high school pathways. Intel has also been a major support in building out OUSD's Computer Science and Engineering pathways, including the creation of a robust mentoring and internship program.

Braiding funds is a critically important part of successfully funding pathways.

Braided funding is the practice of combining funding sources in service of a broader goal, in this case in service of strengthening existing Linked Learning pathways and developing new ones.

Multiple funding sources are used to support key Linked Learning expenditures in OUSD. Measure N, the local parcel tax, is braided with Strong Workforce Program (SWP) dollars to cover a dual enrollment specialist and dual enrollment programs for students, and with California Partnership Academies (CPA) funds to cover transportation for college and career visits. Additionally, Measure N is braided with Oakland Fund for Children and Youth dollars to provide student stipends for internships.

Federal funds can help round out funding for pathways, providing the ability to pay for additional services to support pathways.

The Perkins Act is an important source of federal funding for pathways. One OUSD leader described Perkins funds as “the bread and butter” for some of their pathway initiatives. And Perkins isn’t just part of district decision making and planning—it is central to braided funding efforts at the school level, too. Site administrators in OUSD braid Perkins and other funds to support the pathways at their schools, using a [district-created tool](#) that defines the variety of pathway fund allocations and their allowable uses, and supports comparisons for projected costs within the different budget categories. This tool offers site administrators additional budgetary information and meaningfully engages them in pathway budgeting.

Although the detailed funding picture provided by Figure 3 is not exhaustive, the table identifies key expenditures as identified by district staff, and the corresponding funding sources that pay for them.

ELEVATING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

This study demonstrates how Oakland Unified School District has garnered significant local public support for its Linked Learning practice—and interwoven these resources with additional funds, all supported by effective board policy. As a result, OUSD is well positioned to sustain its pathways and ensure that students are poised for continued success into the future.

This case study is part of a Linked Learning Insight Kit which examines the funding practices and policies of three California school districts to understand how they ensure students are connected to their sense of purpose and on the path to college and career success through times of economic prosperity and hardship.

Access the full kit, including insight brief and additional case studies, at [LinkedLearning.org](https://www.linkedlearning.org).