



Linked Learning and Community Schools

Preparing all Students for College, Career, and Civic Life



Over the past decade, numerous programs and initiatives have gained attention for their explicit focus on preparing students to succeed in college, pursue meaningful careers, and to participate fully in our democracy as engaged citizens. These efforts to achieve equity in student experiences and outcomes could be even more powerful if education leaders brought them together cohesively and worked collaboratively across educational systems and segments, and directly with families and communities. Two such examples are Linked Learning and community schools.

Both are community-based efforts that aim to connect students to life-long learning and success through in-school and out-of-school educational experiences that are meaningful and engaging, foster strong relationships with caring adults, and integrate support structures that address students' academic, social-emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing.

We provide an overview of these two approaches and describe a framework for bringing the two together at the high school level so that all students, particularly those in communities that have been historically marginalized, are on a path to postsecondary success.

Linked Learning

Linked Learning is a systemic, evidence-based approach for transforming high schools to prepare all students for college, career, and civic life. Through career-themed pathways, Linked Learning aims to increase the relevance of students' high school learning experience. Linked Learning pathways integrate four core components throughout the student experience:

- ✓ **Rigorous academics that prepare students to succeed in college**
- ✓ **Career-technical education courses in sequence, emphasizing real-world applications of academic learning**
- ✓ **Work-based learning that provides exposure to real-world workplaces and teaches the professional skills needed to thrive in a career**
- ✓ **Integrated student supports to address the individual needs of all students, ensuring equity of access, opportunity, and success¹**

Unlike the vocational programs of yesterday that “tracked” some high school students (often students from low-income or minoritized backgrounds) directly into the workforce while other students were prepared for postsecondary education, Linked Learning prepares all students—particularly students of color and students from low-income families—for success in their postsecondary journeys.²

The results of a multiyear evaluation found consistently positive effects of Linked Learning on high school achievement and graduation; however, there remains a common misperception that Linked Learning is primarily a mechanism for providing career and technical education through integrative practices.³ This perception underemphasizes Linked Learning as a community-based approach to education that can connect subject matter with the places where students live and the issues that affect their communities. By infusing learning experiences with real-world relevance, Linked Learning empowers students to become active, engaged citizens who are able to participate in and contribute fully to our democratic society. Community-based strategies and the provision of student supports—key features of Linked Learning—enable student success, demonstrate a commitment to community stakeholders, and acknowledge the rich assets and strengths of each community in enabling and supporting equitable schooling.

Community Schools

Connecting students' learning to the larger world is also the vision of community schools. Community schools represent a place-based strategy in which partners come together to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.⁴ By providing students with the authentic care, supports, and services they need, community schools help ensure all students realize their full potential. At their foundation, community schools hold a deep commitment to students, families, and community partners and their funds of knowledge. Providing students with opportunities to learn and problem solve within their local context—alongside members of the community and by connecting learning to its history, culture, and economy—is essential to the approach.⁵

While by design, community schools vary based on their local context, these learning environments are often characterized by a set of shared features or pillars:

- ✓ **Integrated student supports that help address out-of-school barriers to learning**
- ✓ **Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities**
- ✓ **Structures and routines for family and community engagement**
- ✓ **Collaborative leadership practices⁶**

Through their multifaceted approach to supporting student learning, community schools have been shown to generate positive student outcomes—including attendance, academic achievement, and high school graduation rates—and to reduce racial and economic opportunity gaps.⁷

Complementary and Reinforcing Approaches

Although community schools and Linked Learning are most often discussed as discrete educational approaches, the two are complementary and reinforcing. In particular, at the high school level, both approaches maintain a commitment to engage students in their learning and promote student growth, wellbeing, and youth development by providing:

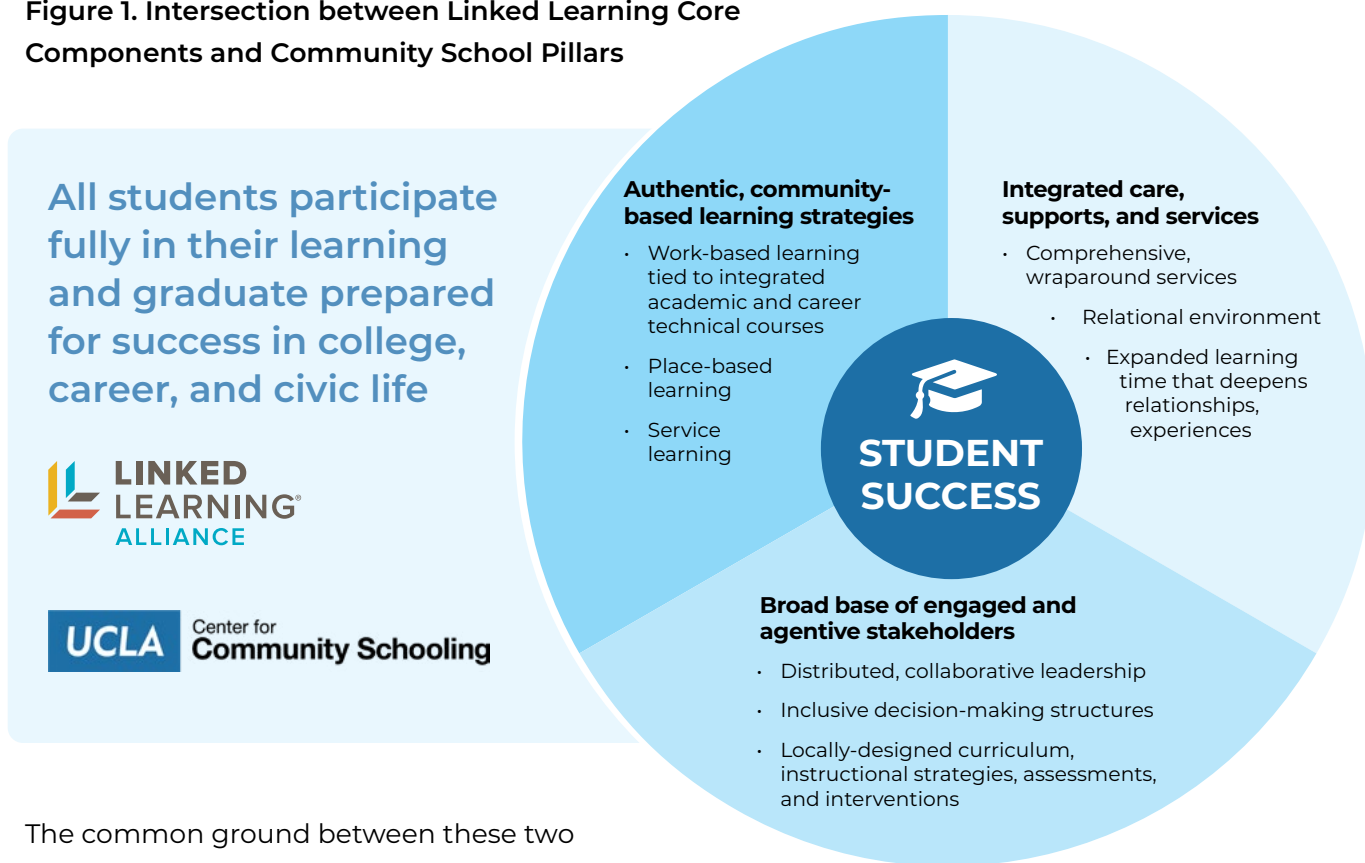
- ✓ **Rich and meaningful learning opportunities wherein students learn beyond the school walls, and in the context of their lives and communities through authentic, community-based learning strategies such as:**
 - Work-based learning tied to integrated academic and career technical coursework designed to bring relevance and real-world application
 - Place-based learning where local history, culture, and environment provide context for learning and problem-solving that connects to lived experience
 - Service learning where activity meets a local community need or interest

- ✓ **Integrated care, supports, and services that enable students to achieve their full potential through:**
 - Comprehensive, wraparound services that address students' mental, physical, and socio-emotional wellbeing and out-of-school barriers to learning
 - Supportive environments for students, families, and educators to develop strong relationships and share expertise and knowledge
 - Expanded learning time opportunities that enable students to develop and deepen relationships with and learn from educators, counselors, community members, and local industry and postsecondary partners

- ✓ **Learning and workplace environments that recognize and elevate the experiences, knowledge and expertise of a broad base of engaged and agentive stakeholders through:**
 - Distributed and collaborative educator leadership working in partnership with families, community, industry, and postsecondary to provide high-quality in school and out-of-school learning experiences and supports
 - Decision-making structures that include students, families, and community partners
 - Locally-designed curriculum, instructional strategies, assessments, and interventions that tap into students assets and interests and address their needs

As illustrated in Figure 1, community schools and Linked Learning employ congruent strategies that address these values and commitments. Expanded learning time opportunities, for example, are strategies used in both approaches to provide students with enriching community-based learning experiences that connect students to local community assets, including employers and higher education partners. Expanded learning time is also used across approaches to provide students with the additional supports (e.g., academic tutoring and additional instruction, mentoring, after-school programming) they may need for wellbeing and success. Similarly, Figure 1 demonstrates how both approaches tap into the expertise and experiences of all community stakeholders. Linked Learning and community schools create workplace environments that value the knowledge of teachers—who work most closely with students—to develop curriculum that taps into students interests and lived experiences, and to make school-level decisions that take local assets and needs into consideration.

Figure 1. Intersection between Linked Learning Core Components and Community School Pillars



The common ground between these two powerful approaches offers insights to high schools and districts seeking intentional, coherent strategies to fuel rich and meaningful learning, particularly among marginalized youth and communities. Linked Learning and community schools strategies can reinforce each other to create experiences that comprehensively attend to students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and empower communities by creating clear paths for all students from learning to lifelong success.

Endnotes

- 1 Linked Learning Alliance. (n.d.) *About the Linked Learning Approach*. San Francisco, CA: Linked Learning Alliance. Available at: <https://www.linkedlearning.org/about/linked-learning-approach>
- 2 Oakes, J., & Saunders, M. (2008). *Beyond tracking: Multiple pathways to college, career, and civic participation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- 3 Caspary, K., and Warner, M. (2020). *Linked Learning student outcomes: Summary of effects on high school and early postsecondary education*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- 4 Coalition for Community Schools. (n.d.). *What is a community school?* Washington, D.C.: Coalition for Community Schools. Available at: http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/what_is_a_community_school.aspx
- 5 Murillo, M., Quartz, K.H., & Del Razo, J. (2017). High school internships: Utilizing a community cultural wealth framework to support career preparation and college-going among low-income students of color. *Journal of education for students placed at risk* (JESPAR), 22(4): 1-16.
- 6 Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., & Lam, L. (2017). *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- 7 Johnston, W. R., Engberg, J., Opper, I.M., Sontag-Padilla, L., & Xenakis, L., (2020). What is the impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative? City of New York, 2020. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10107.html; Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., & Lam, L. (2017). *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.



UCLA's Center for Community Schooling was established with the goal of studying and sharing the work of powerful community schools. With the belief that community schooling has the potential to disrupt long-standing inequities and promote democratic participation, the UCLA Center for Community Schooling is committed to using research to respond to local assets and needs, inform practice and problem solving, and generate new knowledge for the field. In partnership with local districts, leaders and practitioners, the UCLA Center for Community Schooling has established a portfolio of research-practice partnerships that take up pressing educational issues, including college access, persistence, and career preparation.

Learn more at communityschooling.gseis.ucla.edu.



The Linked Learning Alliance is the engine that drives a movement to help every young person determine their own future through a proven approach to education called Linked Learning. Linked Learning integrates rigorous academics with real-world learning and strong support services to prepare students for success in college, career, and life.

The Alliance helps create public will for equity and excellence in education, elevate the practice of Linked Learning across America, and advance policies that serve and support all youth.

Learn more at LinkedLearning.org.