

Linked Learning and Community Schools

Preparing all Students for College, Career, and Civic Life

LINKED LEARNING® ALLIANCE

UCLA Center for Community Schooling

Over the past decade—and with increasing urgency in recent years—California has made historic investments to reimagine public education through a whole-child, whole-family approach. These investments reflect a growing recognition that student success is not solely the product of academic instruction, but of the broader conditions in which students learn, grow, and develop. This is especially important in the context of secondary school redesign. Research has shown that adolescents benefit from strong relationships, a sense of belonging, opportunities to explore their identities, and engaging learning experiences that connect to their futures.[1,2]

Initiatives such as the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), Expanded Learning Opportunities Program, Universal Meals Program, and the Golden State Pathways Program, which leveraged the Linked Learning framework,[3] signal broad public will to ensure that all students—particularly those in historically underserved communities—have access to the relationships, resources, and opportunities needed to thrive.

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While these initiatives are often implemented as distinct efforts, they share a common vision: preparing young people for college, career, and civic life by integrating rigorous learning with meaningful, real-world experiences and comprehensive supports. This moment presents a critical opportunity, not simply to scale individual reforms, but to align and integrate them into a coherent system of whole-child education.

Two of the state's most significant and complementary investments—community schools and high-quality college and career pathways (including Golden State Pathways)—offer a powerful example of this potential. Community schools focus on creating the conditions and opportunity for learning through integrated supports, strong relationships, shared leadership, and powerful community-based learning. High-quality college and career pathways emphasize the relevance and application of academic learning through authentic, world of work experiences. Together, they represent a comprehensive approach that connects conditions for learning with purposeful, future-oriented learning experiences.

This brief builds on this broader vision, underscoring the opportunity and necessity of bringing these aligned strategies to scale through coherent policies and purposeful and integrated implementation to maximize their collective impact on students, families, and communities.



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. Leveraging the Linked Learning framework, the Golden State Pathways Program seeks to expand these experiences for young people across California, bringing rigorous academics and career technical studies, work-based learning, comprehensive student supports, and accelerated college opportunities like dual enrollment together to make learning more relevant and engaging.

More than a decade of practice and research has shown how high-quality, well-integrated learning experiences like these can prepare all students for success in college and career—particularly among Black, Latinx, Indigenous, as well as low-income populations long denied real access to educational and economic justice.

The Linked Learning framework comprises three integrated components:

- **Integrated program of study combining college-preparatory academics with career-technical education through a structured sequence of courses designed to meet both college entrance requirements and industry standards.**
- **Continuum of work-based learning opportunities provide authentic workplace experience and the chance to learn in and from the community through job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and more in partnership with local employers.**
- **Personalized student supports centered on a community-shared vision, a culture of strong interpersonal relationships, elevation of student voice, and including academic counseling, college and career guidance, and targeted interventions that prepare each student for successful transitions beyond high school.**

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 is designed to prepare *all* students for success in the full range of postsecondary possibilities.[4]

A multiyear evaluation demonstrated that this approach produces consistently positive effects of Linked Learning on high school achievement and graduation, particularly among low-income students and students of color.[5] These findings helped establish Linked Learning as an effective approach for improving student outcomes and advancing equity. Despite this evidence, Linked Learning is often mischaracterized as primarily a career and technical education strategy. This perception understates its role as a community-based approach to

education that connects academic 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 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 interest-holders, and acknowledge the rich assets and strengths of each community in enabling and supporting equitable schooling.

Statewide investments over more than a decade, spanning form the 2014 Career Pathways Trust to the 2022 $500 million Golden State Pathways Program, were developed to expand the number of high-quality pathways tied to high-wage, high demand careers—and grounded in the standard of purposeful integration of college and career readiness with comprehensive student supports.



Community Schools

Connecting students' learning to the larger world is also the vision of community schools. Community schools represent a place-based strategy where partners come together to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement. At their foundation, community schools hold a deep commitment to students, families, and community partners and their funds of knowledge.[7,8] Opportunities for students to learn and problem solve within their local context—alongside members of the community and by connecting learning to its history, culture, and economy—are essential to the approach. By providing students with the authentic care, supports, and services they need, community schools help ensure all realize their full potential.[9]

In California, such schools are defined through the California Community Schools Framework, which positions community schooling as a systemic, equity-driven approach to transforming both the conditions for learning and the learning experience itself. The framework makes clear that community schools go well beyond the provision of supports and services—they are designed to be engaging, student-centered environments where students' interests, passions, and lived experiences shape their learning.

The California Community Schools Framework organizes this approach across four interrelated elements:

- ✓ **Pillars that establish the structures for integrated student supports, family and community engagement, collaborative leadership, and extended and enriched learning opportunities.**
- ✓ **Conditions and opportunities for learning that create the foundation for success, including shared vision, trusting relationships, inclusive participation, and aligned resources and assessments.[6]**
- ✓ **Proven practices that bring community schools to life through integrated supports, expanded and enriched learning, authentic partnerships, and coordinated systems.**
- ✓ **Commitments that anchor the work in equity, asset-based approaches, youth and community voice, and continuous improvement.**

Unlike more limited approaches that focus primarily on the delivery of services, California community schools recognize that meaningful transformation depends on the conditions in which students learn and ensuring opportunities for deep and meaningful learning is provided. By emphasizing strong relationships, shared ownership, and coherent systems, community schools move beyond simply providing supports to creating rich learning environments that are relevant, engaging, and rooted in students' identities and experiences. Grounded in community context and sustained through authentic partnerships, these conditions foster deeper engagement and more meaningful educational experiences for all students.[10]

Complementary and Reinforcing Approaches

While community schools and Linked Learning are often discussed as discrete educational approaches, the two are complementary and reinforcing. At the secondary school level in particular, both approaches maintain a commitment to engaging students in their learning and promoting growth, wellbeing, and positive youth development by providing the following.

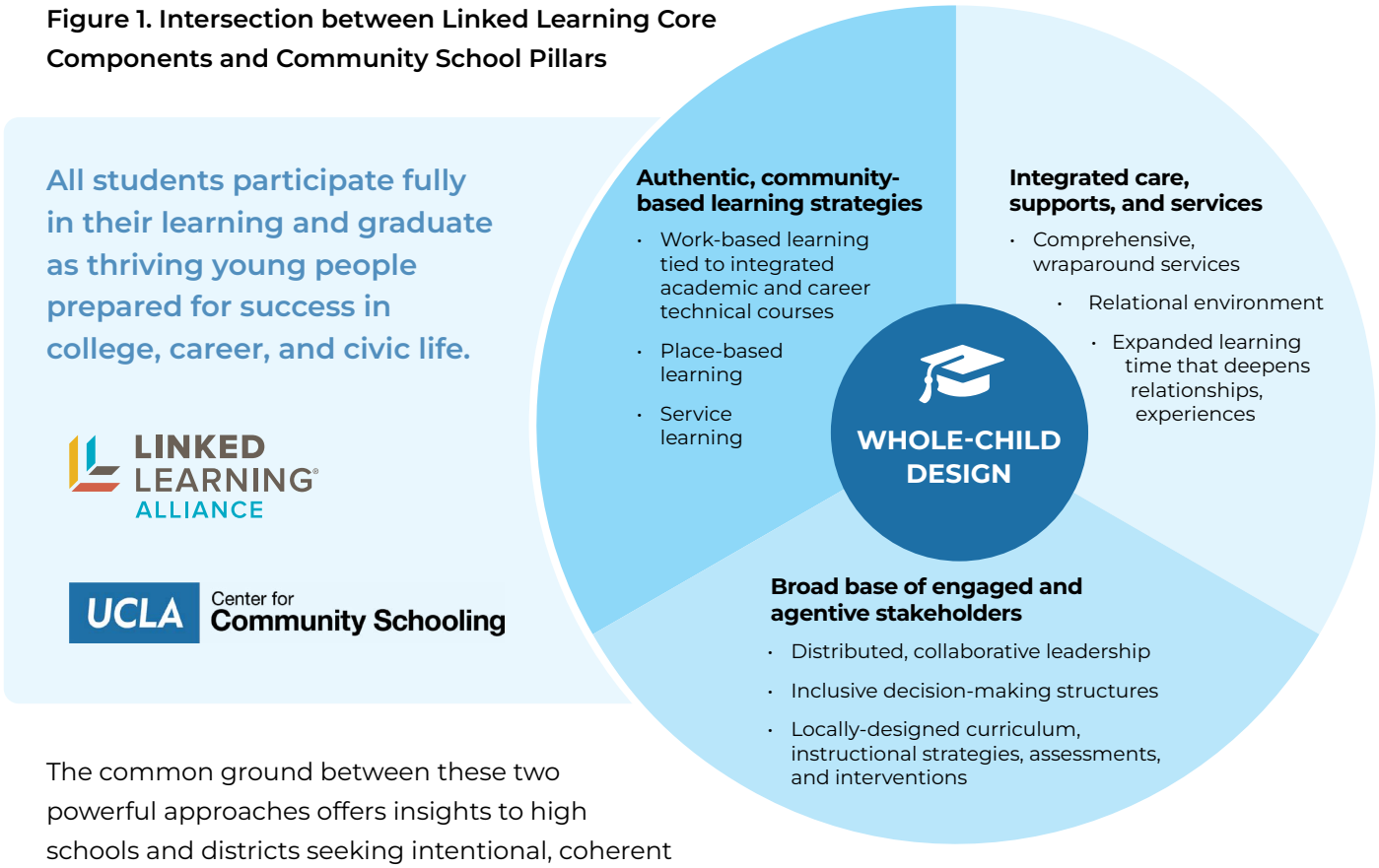
- **Rich and meaningful learning opportunities wherein students learn beyond the school walls, and in the context of their lives and communities through authentic, community-based learning strategies such as:**
  - Work-based learning tied to integrated academic and career technical coursework designed to bring relevance and real-world application.
  - Place-based or community-based learning where local history, culture, and environment provide context for discovery and problem-solving that connects to lived experience.
  - Service learning where activity meets a local community need or interest.
  - Performance-based assessments enabling students to demonstrate learning through real-world applications—such as projects, portfolios, and presentations—for authentic audiences.
  - Accelerated college opportunities, like dual enrollment, which provide the chance to experience postsecondary learning and accumulate college credits while in high school.

- **Integrated care, supports, and services that enable students to achieve their full potential, including:**
  - 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 opportunities that enable students to build relationships with—and learn with and from—educators, counselors, community members, and 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 interest-holders 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 that address their needs.
  - Ongoing professional learning and capacity-building that enables educators, staff, and partners to collaboratively design, implement, and sustain this work, fostering shared ownership and long-term sustainability.

Community schools and Linked Learning employ congruent strategies that operationalize these shared commitments. Expanded learning time opportunities, for example, are strategies used in both approaches to provide students with enriching community-based learning experiences that connect them to local community assets, including employers and higher education partners. These strategies are also used 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. Likewise, both community schools and Linked Learning tap into the expertise and experiences of community interest-holders. Both approaches create learning and workplace environments that value the knowledge and experiences 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.

Importantly, we now have clear proof points of these complementary approaches in action—including case studies that demonstrate how the approaches reinforce one another when delivered together, amplifying the positive impact on young people, educators, and communities.

CASE STUDY

Community-Connected Redesign at Fremont High School*

Fremont High School, part of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), offers a compelling example of what is possible through aligned, districtwide commitments to both community schools and Linked Learning. OUSD has made a sustained investment in redesigning learning environments in a way that weaves together these approaches—prioritizing community schools as a strategy for whole-child support, shared decision-making, and community partnership, while also implementing a "wall-to-wall" Linked Learning model that organizes high schools around college- and career-connected pathways. Within this broader district vision, the Fremont High School redesign reflects how these two approaches can work together to fundamentally reshape both the structure and purpose of high school.

Fremont's transformation began with a strong foundation in community engagement and relationship-building. Through a community schools approach, the school partnered with students, families, and community organizations to co-design systems that integrate supports, elevate community voice, and create meaningful opportunities for participation and leadership. This approach not only strengthened trust and belonging, but also expanded what learning looks like and where it happens. In the words of one school leader, a community school is "not just academics; it means getting [students] jobs, job training; it means building experiences where students really feel connected," underscoring how supports and learning opportunities are deeply intertwined.

Meanwhile, Linked Learning pathways provide a coherent structure for organizing rigorous, relevant, and future-oriented learning experiences. Through industry-themed pathways, dual enrollment, and work-based learning, students engage in interdisciplinary, project-based experiences that connect academic content to real-world applications. Learning is strengthened by the relationships and partnerships cultivated through the community schools approach; it extends beyond the classroom in ways that address community needs and students' personal experiences. One student reflected: "School is the prime time in life to make as many mistakes as you possibly can so that you can learn from them," highlighting how these environments support both exploration and growth.

* Adapted from: Thompson, C. (2025). Community-connected redesign at Fremont High School. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-connected-redesign-fremont-brief

CASE STUDY

Community-Connected, Integrated College and Career Preparation at San Andreas Continuation High School*

San Andreas Continuation High School, part of the San Bernardino City Unified School District, offers a compelling example of how community schools and Linked Learning can be integrated to support students who have been pushed to the margins of traditional schooling. As one of approximately 420 continuation high schools in California serving students over age 16 who are at risk of dropping out of high school, San Andreas is designed to provide a renewed pathway toward academic success, credit recovery, and high school completion. Over the past decade, the school has undergone a significant transformation, grounded in a deliberate alignment of Linked Learning instructional approaches with a comprehensive community school design. This integrated model has earned San Andreas recognition as a Model Continuation High School by the California Department of Education, as well as Gold Certification for its implementation of Linked Learning pathways and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

At the core of this transformation is a student-centered and equity-focused approach that brings together educators, career technical education (CTE) partners, student support staff, and community stakeholders to address the full range of students' developmental needs, strengths, and aspirations. Through a community schools' framework, San Andreas has built an integrated system of supports that extends beyond academics to address social, emotional, and material barriers to learning. Student support programs are designed to "wrap around" students, increasing their access to resources and opportunities for positive youth development while strengthening their capacity to succeed in school and beyond.

Within this broader structure, Linked Learning pathways provide a coherent framework for organizing rigorous and relevant learning experiences. The framework elevates the combination of academic, durable, professional skills, and social capital known to improve outcomes for young people. The school's health and business pathways integrate California Common Core standards and A–G course requirements with career technical education aligned to industry standards. Instruction emphasizes the application of knowledge through real-world experiences, enabling students to connect academic content to practical, community-based contexts. Through internships, certification programs, and partnerships with local employers,

nonprofit organizations, and civic agencies, students engage in work-based learning that reinforces both skill development and career exploration.

These learning experiences are further strengthened by the school's expanded learning opportunities and integrated supports. A coordinated services team connects students to programs such as Saturday school, summer school, apprenticeships, and dual enrollment opportunities at local community colleges. At the same time, San Andreas provides comprehensive social, emotional, and wellness supports through structures such as a Community Resource Center and a College and Career Center. These resources offer assistance with job readiness, college applications, financial aid, parenting workshops, and access to basic needs such as food and housing supports. School staff also provide counseling services focused on emotional support, conflict resolution, and postsecondary planning, with targeted supports for foster and homeless youth.

Importantly, these efforts are grounded in strong partnerships with families and community organizations. Parents are actively consulted about services for their children, and school staff work to connect families with community-based resources, reinforcing a collaborative, integrated support system. These partnerships are central to the community schools approach and contribute to a broader culture of trust, belonging, and shared responsibility.

* Adapted from: *San Andreas Continuation High School: Integrated Academic, Career, and Technical Pathways for Positive Youth Development and College and Career Readiness.* Jorge Ruiz de Velasco and Daniel Storz. Available at: https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/sites/gardnercenter/files/media/file/san-andreas-continuation-hs-san-bernardino-final_0.pdf

SUMMARY

Together, community schools and Linked Learning operate as deeply intertwined, mutually reinforcing approaches to high school redesign that reinforce common principles. Both strategies contribute to creating learning environments where students are known, supported, and engaged in meaningful work. As the case studies above demonstrate, this integration has helped move beyond a traditional model of schooling toward one centered on relationships, relevance, and real-world connection. As a student attending Fremont shared, "School is where you can be anyone without anybody judging you... a place where people want to see the real you," capturing how these approaches not only prepare students for college, career, and civic life—but also foster a sense of belonging, identity, and purpose.

Endnotes

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9 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.

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UCLA Center for Community Schooling

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.

LINKED LEARNING® ALLIANCE

The Linked Learning Alliance drives the 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.