Linked Learning Gold Certification Middle School Review Guide

FALL 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Linked Learning standards and certification are based on the belief that all students deserve highly engaging, hands-on learning experiences that help them understand the relevance of their education, prepare them academically for further learning, and help them see the connection between education and their future career paths.

Linked Learning Gold Certification indicates that the leaders of a learning pathway are committed to delivering high-quality experiences that benefit pathway students and community. It also demonstrates that they are contributing to the development of a stronger Linked Learning field and celebrated for the steps they are taking to ensure students are ready for further learning and careers. Gold Certification is available to qualified high schools and middle schools.

Designed expressly for use by middle school educators and administrators, the principles and practices embedded in the Linked Learning Gold Certification Middle School Standards provide a framework for equity and, ultimately, achieving successful college and career outcomes. Linked Learning Middle School pathways are aligned to high school Linked Learning pathways and the rigorous academic expectations of a college prep curriculum to set the stage for high school and postsecondary success.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide provides educators with an understanding of the evaluation and certification process and the role of the reviewers in that process. The evaluation is best understood as part of a continuous improvement process that also provides site and district decision makers with useful information about areas of strength and recommendations for improvement.

In the following pages, key steps on the pathway certification process are defined to support expectation setting and planning.

Questions? Suggestions?
Contact the Linked Learning Alliance,
certification@linkedlearning.org

CERTIFICATION PLATFORM TIPS

- Certification or pathway lead can use the "Team" tab on the "Pathway" page to ensure everyone on the pathway team has access to the platform.

- District staff can access the platform to verify that district comparison data is entered and represents the most recently completed academic year. They may also collaborate with the pathway team and find contact information for the Lead Reviewer.

- When entering data or narratives, don't forget to click on "SAVE" after every entry and before navigating away from the page. Work will only be saved after you click on the "SAVE" button and will otherwise be lost.

- For the data pages, reviewers will not be able to start their review until the pathway or certification lead has filled in all data fields AND clicked on the "Submit" button at the top of any data page. All data fields must be filled in before submitting. If you do not have data for a particular field, select "N/A or did not collect" and explain.

- On the artifacts pages, reviewers will not be able to start the review until the pathway or certification lead has marked all domains "Complete." The progress bar at the top of any page will display the number of domains marked complete. Once all are complete the progress bar will change to a "Submit" button. You must click on the "Submit" button to allow reviewers to begin the review. This should be done at least ten days prior to the Preliminary Review meeting.

- The pathway team will no longer be able to edit the review until after the preliminary review meeting. At that point, the team will be able to see reviewers' responses and edit or amend the review as needed.

INITIAL CONTACT WITH PATHWAY TEAM

An independent lead reviewer will be selected to:

- Build a collaborative relationship with the pathway lead and team, and support them through the certification process

- Lead a virtual evidence review and provides feedback

- Plan the site visit in consultation with the pathway lead and other key stakeholders

- Draft and complete a final report in collaboration with the Linked Learning Alliance

- Help curate key artifacts from the certification process

- Take part in a community of practice with other reviewers and the Linked Learning Alliance to refine and improve the process

The process begins when the lead reviewer reaches out to the pathway lead and district team to set up a 30- to 60-minute introductory online meeting. Meeting objectives include:

- Provide introductions and describe roles, including that of lead reviewer

- Agree on method of communications and expectations, including that lead reviewer is expected to respond to communications from pathway lead(s) within 48 hours

- Develop timeline, considering internal timeline if already established, as well as this *estimated* (and fluid) 8- to 10-week timeline:

  - Initial contact meeting

  - ~4 weeks to gather evidence artifacts, write narratives, and prepare for the preliminary review

  - 3–4 weeks to work on any revisions/additions identified in the preliminary review and prepare for the site visit

  - 1-day for in-person site visit, plus additional virtual stakeholder focus groups

  - Recommendation by lead reviewer

- Review entire process at a high level

- Discuss Q&A

Coming out of this session, the lead reviewer shares a summary of the meeting with the Linked Learning Alliance and pathway team.

PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE REVIEW

Eligibility for Linked Learning certification is determined through the careful review of a number of types of evidence that the pathway is applying the Linked Learning approach with fidelity and at high levels of quality.

SELECTING AND SUBMITTING EVIDENCE

Pathway teams should select ***no more than three key pieces of evidence*** for each of the standards. Some evidence may support more than one standard. Less is more; focus on high-leverage pieces of evidence. District and pathway teams should also provide data related to outcomes as described in the standards.

To formally submit this evidence for review, the certification or pathway lead uploads data and artifacts to the certification platform a minimum of 10 days prior to the preliminary review (or according to other timing established in agreement with the lead reviewer).

REVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the preliminary evidence review should include:
- Lead reviewer
- Linked Learning Alliance reviewer
- Pathway lead(s), coach, or site/district administrators
- Pathway team members (optional)

REVIEW EXPERIENCE

The lead reviewer leads the preliminary review process. The pathway team is asked to walk reviewers through each strand (e.g., integrated program of study) and domain (e.g., cohort structure) describing the pathway program.

Pathway teams should be prepared to discuss pathway data and artifacts for each domain, including appropriate context for understanding this information. The review team may ask clarifying questions regarding provided data and artifacts. This is an opportunity to identify any gaps that need to be addressed prior to the site visit. In addition, reviewers should identify key questions or focus areas for the site visit and share these with the pathway lead(s).

Sample Agenda	
1. Introductions and agenda	*5 min*
2. Integrated program of study	*15–20 min presentation, 5–10 min Q&A*
3. Work-based learning	*15–20 min presentation, 5–10 min Q&A*
4. Integrated student supports	*15–20 min presentation, 5–10 min Q&A*
5. Debrief and conclusion	*5 min*

By the conclusion of the preliminary review, reviewers should be prepared to share a preliminary assessment for each strand. Reviewers should also identify tentative commendations and recommendations for each of the domains to be featured in the final report. These initial assessments with respect to the standards and specific domains are tentative and must be verified during the site visit.

Within five days of the preliminary review, the lead reviewer should provide the pathway team with any feedback, questions, or clarifications via the reviewer portal.

SITE VISIT

The site visit is an opportunity for an external reviewer to validate a pathway's quality and provide feedback to both the district and pathway team.

This visit may be a hybrid of in-person and virtual meetings. Virtual focus groups (e.g., with community and industry partners, parents, etc.) are encouraged in order to promote greater participation and perspective. These do not have to be held on the same day as the in-person site visit.

Based on any areas of further inquiry or examination, the lead reviewer and pathway and district leads develop the visit schedule. This schedule typically combines an opening presentation by pathway leaders and key stakeholders, as well as classroom visits, interviews, focus groups, and other meetings. Classroom visits should be focused on highlighting particular practices of the pathway related to the Linked Learning middle school standards.

Appendix A provides a sample site visit agenda, but there is flexibility in how it is structured in order to reflect the schedule, culture, and voices of the pathway community.

Appendix B offers sample prompts for each focus group. Some combination of these questions is generally used to begin the conversations. Ultimately, the questions and topics covered should be guided by the conversation, the outcomes of the preliminary review, and the interests of participants.

In the final meeting of the site visit with the pathway team, a draft timeframe for addressing any deficient areas should be agreed upon (and recorded in the final report).

While the pathway team and site and district leaders may be inclined to interpret the visit as a form of compliance, the lead reviewer should do their best to set a tone consistent with the ultimate goal of continuous improvement. That is to say, while Linked Learning certification is an important result for all involved and while the in-depth examination of pathway quality taking place during the site visit will lead to commendations and recommendations in the final report, everything surfaced through this process can and should inform continuous improvement, regardless of the certification decision.

Under the supervision of the Linked Learning Alliance, lead reviewers actively support pathway teams or pathways lead teachers prior to, during, and after the site visit in order to prepare an effective final report.

FINAL REPORT

After the site visit, the lead reviewer develops a final report, including recommendations with respect to certification, and submits it to the Linked Learning Alliance via the reviewer portal.

Certification involves a holistic approach to reviewing pathway quality based on an examination of artifacts and pathway data, as well as reflections on the site review of program. In their reports, reviewers may identify individual standards within domains as needing improvement.

If a pathway is not recommended for certification, the final report must clearly identify the strand(s) and domain(s) that are below standard, reasons why the pathway is falling short, and domain-specific recommendations for improvement.

The Linked Learning Alliance uses the final report to work with the pathway team over an agreed-upon period of time and will conduct a final review. The form of the final review will be determined by the Alliance in consultation with the pathway team. In all cases, Alliance makes the final determination regarding certification.

While Linked Learning Gold certification is a significant accomplishment and milestone worth celebrating, it is not intended to be the end of the road. Rather, it is a snapshot at a point in time that ultimately informs the return to a continuous improvement cycle. Likewise, it is a sign of commitment to excellence and equity in education, both of which require attention and intention over time.

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE SCHEDULE FOR A SITE VISIT

NOTES TO AGENDA PLANNERS

On timing the school visit

- Times shown in the example below are for demonstration purposes only
- You may begin and end the site visit day according to the school schedule
- Site visit schedule should be as least disruptive as possible to the school's daily routine and schedule
- Include breaks between agenda items to allow for discussion and transition time

On parent and industry partner focus groups

- Virtual focus groups may take place on a date and time outside the school day
- It's possible to combine these meetings into a single community meeting
- Consider which option will result in the greatest level of participation and available time

SAMPLE AGENDA

Time	Period	Objective	Room #
8:30 a.m. – 9:15 a.m. (45 min)	Period 1	**Opening Meeting: School and Site Visit Day Overview** District, school, and pathway leadership; community members welcome	(Room #)
9:30 p.m. – 10:30 p.m. (60 min)	Period 2–3	**Classroom Visits (15–20 min each)** (Grade-course name) (Grade-course name) (Grade-course name) (Grade-course name)	 (Room #) (Room #) (Room #) (Room #)
10:40 a.m. – 11:20 a.m. (40 min)	Period 4	**Focus Group: Pathway Faculty**	(Room #)
11:25 a.m. – 11:55 a.m. (30 min)	Lunch	**Focus Group: Pathway Students** (Lunch provided)	(Room #)
12:00 p.m. – 12:30 p.m. (30 min)	Lunch	**Focus Group – Students**	(Room #)
12:00 p.m. – 12:20 p.m. (20 min)	Period 5	**Check-in with Pathway Certification Leadership**	(Room #)
12:30 p.m. – 1:10 p.m. (40 min)	Period 6	**Classroom Visits** (Grade-course name) (Grade-course name)	(Room #) (Room #) (Room #)
1:15 p.m. – 1:55 p.m. (40 min)	After school	**Review Team Meeting**	(Room #)
2:00 p.m. – 2:20 p.m. (20 min)	After school	**Discussion and Debrief with Key Staff**	(Room #)

Date/Time	Purpose	Online Access
Thurs. xx/xx 5:00 – 5:45	**Parent Panel Focus Group** • (Participant Name) • (Participant Name) • (Participant Name) • (Participant Name)	https://zoom.us/principal
Wed. xx/xx 5:45 – 6:45	**Advisory Board/Industry Partner Focus Group** • (Participant Name) • (Participant Name) • (Participant Name) • (Participant Name)	https://zoom.us /principal

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP GUIDANCE

Provided below are sample focus group and opening presentation prompts.

LEADERSHIP TEAM FOCUS GROUP

Introductions and Overview

1. Overview of the pathway.

2. What do you feel are the one or two greatest strengths of this pathway?

3. What do you feel are the one or two key areas that we explore for improvement during the site visit?

Integrated Program of Study

4. **High School Alignment:** How is college and career preparation aligned with high school expectations and programs? What choice do families have in selecting a high school pathway and how do they learn about it?

5. **Rigorous Integrated Academics:** How is the district, site, or pathway collecting evidence of student achievement in preparing students to succeed in high school A–G courses?

6. **Social Emotional Learning:** How does the pathway address the development of social awareness, self-management, and a mindset of growth and self-agency?

Work-Based Learning

7. Please describe your work-based learning continuum of opportunities (career exploration and awareness) and key outcomes of your work-based learning program.

8. Do students have work-based learning plans, and do they participate in self- assessments?

9. **Work-based Learning Plan and Student Assessment:** How do you assess the impact of work-based learning activities?

10. **Employer/Provider Evaluation:** How do industry and employers provide input and feedback about work-based learning?

Student Supports

11. What types of orientation activities take place to prepare students for pathway success?

12. **Equitable Enrollment:** What are the student demographics of the pathway?

13. **Student Validation*:* How is student feedback collected and how is it applied to the design and improvement of the pathway?

COMMUNITY/INDUSTRY PARTNERS FOCUS GROUP

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us about your professional work.

2. What has been your involvement with this pathway and for how long?

3. What opportunities have you had to work within a classroom for a teacher-created project?

4. What opportunities have you had to assess students' work?

5. What do you see from the students?

Work-Based Learning Assessment, Professionalism, and Workplace Readiness

6. How do you think your work at this pathway has impacted students? How could it be more impactful for you and students?

7. **Employer/Provider Validation:** Quality work-based learning includes opportunities for thoughtful self-reflection and feedback from providers. How do providers assess, reflect, and give feedback related to the work-based learning experiences they are engaged in directly or support?

8. How have you been involved in any of the pathway's curriculum or projects (includes looking at student work)?

9. What do you feel are the strengths of the pathway?

Advisory Board

10. Are you a member of the advisory board?

11. How did you become involved in the advisory board?

12. How has the advisory board supported the pathway and student outcomes related to college or career readiness?

Parents

13. What grade is your child in and how long have they been in this pathway?

14. How do the school and individual teachers communicate with you?

15. Do you feel that you have a good understanding of the academic expectations for your child? Why or why not?

16. Does your child feel safe and supported at school?

17. Are you aware of the options open to you and your child in selecting a high school pathway?

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP

Introduction and Goals

1. Please tell us your name, what grade you are in, and how long you have been in this pathway.

2. How do you think this pathway might be preparing you for high school and for a career?

Integrated Program of Study

3. **Culminating Experience:** Can you talk about a project you did this past year that was supported by more than one class? Have you participated or do you know if you will be expected to do a [culminating project/defense of learning] presentation? How is this different from other assessments/tests or presentations you do?

4. What do you like about your pathway?

5. Are you asked to reflect on your work and give feedback to teachers about a project when it is over?

Work-Based Learning

6. How is work-based learning a part of the pathway?

7. Does your pathway have an industry theme? Can you tell me something about it?

8. Tell us about activities you've participated in to learn about careers and specific jobs*.* Have you had the chance to talk with someone about their job and/or about what you'd like to do?

Student Support

9. How do you find out about high school pathways?

10. Did you pick this pathway or were you assigned? If you picked it, what made you choose it?

11. What types of student orientation activities did you do to help yourself get started?

12. Can you talk about how you are supported at your school? Who do you go to when you have problems or questions?

Pathway Improvement

13. If you were going to tell a student that they should come to this pathway, what would be the best reason you would share?

14. If you could improve something about your pathway, what would it be and why?

FACULTY/STAFF FOCUS GROUP

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us about your role.

2. What is a key strength of the pathway/academy?

Integrated Program of Study

3. How does the pathway integrate curriculum, and how do academic courses integrate the pathway theme?

4. How do you provide experiential learning opportunities to your students?

5. What kinds of performance assessments do you ask of your students?

6. **Social Emotional Learning:** What activities do students participate in that emphasize the development of social awareness, self-management, and a mindset of growth, as well as a healthy sense of self?

7. **Equitable Enrollment and Admissions:** How are students selected and placed in the pathway?

8. **Culminating Experience:** Can you describe your culminating project or portfolio that students do?

9. How is teaching in a pathway different from teaching in a traditional setting?

Work-Based Learning

10. **Work-Based Learning Plan:** Please describe your work-based learning continuum of opportunities and outcomes.

11. **Work-Based Learning Assessment:** How do you assess the impact of work-based learning activities?

12. **Employer/Partner Validation:** How do industry and employers provide input and feedback about work-based learning?

Support Services

13. What types of student orientation activities take place that prepare students for pathway success?

14. **Student Validation:** How is student feedback collected, and how is it applied to the design and improvement of the pathway?

15. What supports are available to you in your classroom?

16. How are parents supported and encouraged to participate?

Linked Learning is a systemic approach to education dedicated to the idea that students work harder and dream bigger when their learning connects with them and connects them to the world. Linked Learning gives students the supports they need to prepare for college and career, and helps them grow through real work experiences so they can fully participate in shaping civic, cultural, and economic life. Proven in California and spreading across the United States, this approach works because it is built on relevance, equity, and hope.

The Linked Learning Alliance serves the coalition of educators, employers, and community organizations dedicated to advancing equity and excellence through Linked Learning. The Alliance provides a collective voice for this field, advocates for policies that support the Linked Learning approach, sets the quality standard for Linked Learning in practice, and brings diverse stakeholders together to improve outcomes for students.

Learn more at LinkedLearning.org