

Evaluation of the California Linked Learning District Initiative

Year-Three Report
Executive Summary

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About Linked Learning

Evaluation of Linked Learning in a set of California school districts indicates that participating students are:

- On track for high school graduation
- Preparing for college
- Building skills for career and life

This document summarizes these and other findings drawn from a full report covering the first three years of the California Linked Learning District Initiative, available at www.irvine.org.

Since 2006, The James Irvine Foundation has made a significant investment in Linked Learning, a promising approach to transforming education in California. In 2009, Irvine launched the California Linked Learning District Initiative to support implementation of the initiative in nine California school districts serving more than 150,000 youth. Presented here are preliminary findings on student outcomes and the status of implementation of the initiative in its third year.

Linked Learning integrates rigorous academics with real-world experiences. This approach aims to transform education into a personally relevant, wholly engaging experience — and open students to career and college opportunities they never imagined. This approach builds on more than four decades of experience gained by California schools that combine academic and technical content to raise student achievement. It seeks to improve high school graduation rates and increase successful transitions to a full range of postsecondary education opportunities, particularly for low-income and disadvantaged youth.

Linked Learning is delivered through career pathways, comprehensive programs of study that connect learning in the classroom with real-world applications outside of school. Students select a pathway of their choice.

Core Components of the Approach

Linked Learning combines four elements designed to support student success:

Rigorous academics — A challenging academic core curriculum featuring instruction in essential subjects such as English, math, science, social studies, foreign language and visual and performing arts.

Real-world experience — A demanding combination of career and technical coursework emphasizing the practical use of academic learning and preparing youth for high-skill, high-wage employment.

Work-based learning — A range of opportunities to learn through meaningful real-world experiences, including internships, apprenticeships and school-based enterprises.

Personalized support — Academic and social supports, such as counseling and additional instruction in reading, writing and mathematics, with the goal of helping all students succeed in and outside school.

Evaluation and Reporting

ConnectEd:

The California Center for College and Career is dedicated to advancing practice, policy and research aimed at helping young people prepare for both college and career through Linked Learning.

The California Linked Learning District Initiative has been evaluated by SRI International, an independent nonprofit research institute, each year of its implementation.

This summary, as well as the full report on which it is based, examines preliminary data on student outcomes from four selected Linked Learning districts. Each of these districts focuses on pathways to college and career that meet criteria for quality certification by [ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career](#), the national hub for Linked Learning practice. This summary also assesses implementation progress across all nine school districts participating in this initiative, drawing on interviews, student focus groups and student surveys.

Students and school districts have made meaningful progress toward meeting the goals of the initiative. The early, positive signs reported here should encourage districts and partners to persevere in their Linked Learning implementation efforts, understanding that building system-wide quality experiences takes time.

Student Outcomes

While the District Initiative is in its third year and no student has yet experienced the full, four-year treatment, preliminary findings on student outcomes show signs of promise.

Evaluators examined early indicators of pathway students' progress toward high school graduation and California university eligibility, adjusting for students' background characteristics and prior achievement using a value-added research approach. While the District Initiative is in its third year and no student has yet experienced the full, four-year treatment, preliminary findings on student outcomes show signs of promise.

On Track for High School Graduation

Research shows that students who struggle early in high school and fall behind in credit accumulation are more likely to drop out than those who stay on track academically.¹ Accordingly, credit accumulation and numbers of courses failed are key indicators of progress toward on-time graduation. Early results from the Linked Learning student outcomes analyses show that:

- Students in certified pathways accumulate more credits by the end of the ninth and

¹ The Consortium on Chicago School Research found that students in Chicago Public Schools who earned at least 25 percent of the credits necessary for high school graduation and failed no more than a single semester of an academic core course by the end of their freshman year of high school were 3.5 times more likely to graduate from high school than those who did not (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

Findings suggest that students in certified pathways make strong progress toward credit completion.

10th grades when compared with similar peers in their district.

- Pathway students tend to fail fewer courses in 10th grade when compared with similar peers in their district. Pathway and non-pathway students fail similar numbers of courses in ninth grade.

These findings suggest that students in certified pathways make strong progress toward credit completion. However, many pathway programs struggle to make credit recovery options available for students who do fail courses.

Preparing for College

California requires high school students who aspire to attend one of the state's four-year public universities to complete a rigorous academic program, generally known as the UC/CSU a-g requirements. Analysis of student achievement data revealed that:

- In two districts, students in certified pathways are making greater progress toward a-g completion when compared with similar peers in their district.²

² District Initiative evaluators analyzed ninth-grade student outcomes for the class of 2013 and class of 2014 and 10th-grade student outcomes for the class of 2013.

Also relevant, though more difficult to measure, are the “soft skills” that students may gain from their pathway experiences.

The initiative’s emphasis on curriculum and instruction contributes to a pathway culture that values challenge and a sense of personal responsibility, which may encourage students to pursue the a-g completion goal.

Building Skills for Career and Life

The success of Linked Learning pathways can be assessed, in part, through the academic gains described above. Also relevant, though more difficult to measure, are the “soft skills” that students may gain from their pathway experiences.

Pathway students were more likely than students not in pathways to report improvements in taking personal responsibility, problem-solving, using information and communication technology, collaborating and understanding workplace expectations.

Program Implementation

At this early stage and given the scale of the initiative, full implementation of Linked Learning understandably remains a work in progress.

One of the most persistent problems in numerous educational reform initiatives is their limited impact on how teachers and students interact in high school classrooms. The California Linked Learning District Initiative is working to demonstrate how this trend can be countered, and student outcomes improved, through early focus on curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Implementation results document progress in a number of areas. Still, at this early stage and given the scale of the initiative, full implementation of Linked Learning understandably remains a work in progress. Even in districts that have years of experience with approaches that share elements in common with Linked Learning, such as small, themed high schools, full implementation of Linked Learning is a year or two away for the most mature pathways — and remains a longer-term goal for pathways that are only a year or two into the implementation process.

District and pathway staffs are discovering that it takes years to build aligned curriculum, instruction and assessments that are rigorous and authentically connected to the pathway theme.

The focus on curriculum, instruction and assessment is strong; these elements would improve with deeper connections across disciplines and to pathway themes

With intensive focus and support from ConnectEd and technical assistance providers, district and pathway staffs are delving into the core teaching and learning components of Linked Learning — integrated curriculum, varied instructional strategies including project-based learning, and performance-based assessments.

Pathway staffs are making good progress toward developing interdisciplinary projects. Students report that these projects are engaging and reinforce content within and across classes. Beyond these projects, however, the interdisciplinary approach to instruction has yet to be broadly and deeply integrated into the daily curriculum. District and pathway staffs are discovering that it takes years to build aligned curriculum, instruction and assessments that are rigorous and authentically connected to the pathway theme.

Students are enthusiastic about their work-based learning experiences and are eager for more such opportunities.

Work-based learning experiences are valued by students; competing school priorities and limited staff time are barriers

Students are enthusiastic about their work-based learning experiences and are eager for more such opportunities. They report feeling that these experiences broadened their perspectives on the career options available, taught them relevant career and professional skills, and showed them the connection between academic content and real-world applications.

Pathway staffs have been working on developing a continuum of work-based learning experiences for their students. However, many pathway staffs struggle with organizing and planning meaningful work-based learning opportunities due to inadequate time and competing priorities. Further, most pathways have not yet successfully made strong connections between work-based learning experiences and the students' technical and academic coursework.

Students feel supported by teachers and peers, but less so by school counseling services

Pathway students feel they are getting strong academic and social support from their teachers and peers. Their feelings about counseling support are more mixed. While there are encouraging signs that districts are improving counseling, budget cuts

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continue to threaten counseling capacity. This means that many students, especially in the lower grades, receive limited counseling support. As districts consider how to support and sustain the Linked Learning approach, adequately funding counseling will need to be a priority.

Linked Learning remains focused on advancing equity in education; district choice and recruitment policies may make pathways less accessible to some disadvantaged students

Foundational to the Linked Learning approach is the aspiration to advance equity in education. But this equity agenda remains a work in progress.

Certified pathways in Antioch, Long Beach and Porterville enroll a lower proportion of English language learners, special education students and low-income students than the overall district proportions; only in Pasadena are these students better represented. District choice and recruitment policies may help explain why the profiles of students in certified pathways differ from the proportions of similar students across those districts.

Districts will need to remain vigilant and carefully monitor enrollment patterns, particularly for English language learners and special education students.

As districts work to make Linked Learning pathways accessible for all students, district and pathway personnel will need to consider how their pathway recruitment and student choice policies influence student pathway selection and enrollment. Districts will need to remain vigilant and carefully monitor enrollment patterns, particularly for English language learners and special education students.

While not conclusive, findings in year three of the California Linked Learning District Initiative show participating students preparing for college, career and life. And participating school districts are making great strides as they implement this approach across pathways of study.

Explore the comprehensive findings and recommendations that will guide Linked Learning efforts moving forward in the full evaluation report at www.irvine.org.