

Linked Learning Case Study: Pasadena Unified School District

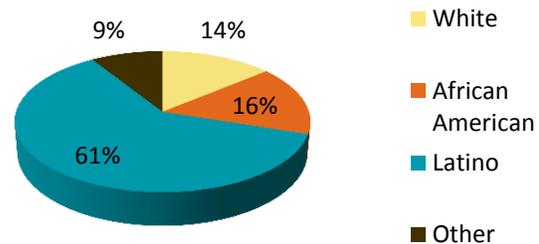
The Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD), based in and around Pasadena, Calif., is a participating member of the Linked Learning District Initiative.

Linked Learning is an approach that is transforming education for California students by integrating rigorous academics with career-based learning and real world workplace experiences. Linked Learning ignites high school students' passions by creating meaningful learning experiences through career-oriented pathways in fields such as engineering, health care, performing arts, law, and more. When students love what they're learning, they work harder, dream bigger, and learn more.

District at a Glance

- Serves the communities of Pasadena, Altadena, and Sierra Madre
- Home to CalTech, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Kaiser Permanente, and Pasadena City College
- 30 percent of students participated in pathways at start of 2011-12 school year – goal of 58 percent by 2014

Ethnically Diverse Population



Pathways

- Arts, Entertainment, and Media Academy
- Business and Entrepreneurship Academy
- Creative Arts, Media, and Design Pathway
- Culinary Arts and Hospitality Academy
- Engineering and Environmental Science Academy
- Health Careers Academy
- Information Technology Pathway

Challenges to Overcome

The core challenge facing PUSD as they began to explore Linked Learning was a historically strained relationship between the school district and the community, dating back to the days of court-ordered desegregation. White, higher-income families began sending their children to private schools, changing the PUSD student body demographics. Today, PUSD serves a proportionally higher number of Latino and African American families, as well as students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, than are represented in the surrounding communities. This disconnect resulted in low expectations, community disengagement from the school district, and an initial “us versus them” culture, all of which made achieving community buy-in for Linked Learning a challenge.

From Vision to Reality

There are four core elements that led to the successful implementation of Linked Learning in Pasadena:

1. **Game Changer: A Superintendent engaged and willing to collaborate.** In 2007, PUSD hired Superintendent Edwin Diaz to spearhead the implementation of Linked Learning. Diaz took a consciously collaborative approach, beginning with a “listening and learning” tour with stakeholders to

understand needs, build relationships, and foster ownership. District and site leaders credit Diaz with the resulting change in district culture that led to a shared commitment to Linked Learning.

2. Partnering with local employers. Every community has strengths that can be leveraged to support Linked Learning. For Pasadena, these included California Partnership Academies already operating within its high schools; rich community resources, such as CalTech, Kaiser Permanente, and growing industry sectors; preexisting partnerships with industry; and support from the mayor’s office. These served as the foundation for Linked Learning and for a deeper relationship with the community.

3. Making Linked Learning sustainable. To help stakeholders better understand and be able to support the various components of Linked Learning, PUSD devoted significant resources to capacity building.

- a. At the district level,** this meant distributing leadership across the central office by establishing a “Pathways Core Team,” with point people for schools, business, academies, professional development, and postsecondary colleges, to manage Linked Learning implementation.
- b.** PUSD further brought the district and the schools together by requiring executive team members to visit a pathway classroom. The site visits brought Linked Learning to life for the executives, helping them to see the impact on students.
- c. At the schools,** capacity-building involved teacher-driven professional development for pathway teachers, sponsored by the district and conducted with technical assistance from an outside consultant. These sessions allowed teachers to develop pathway outcomes, plan integrated projects, and calendar events for the school year.
- d.** To prevent the loss of trained pathway teachers, districts created a protective “skipping criteria” that bypassed certified pathway teachers during layoffs, changing a long-standing “Last-In, First Out” policy.

“Once you got on the ground, it really made it clear what was going on with Linked Learning. It helps the whole organization when you have executive leadership with a common understanding of goals, objectives, and what it’s all about it. We realized that we all affect it. It helped provide a lot of clarity and understanding around what the program means for kids.” – Pathway walk-through participant

4. Dedicated community outreach. To foster ownership and help make Linked Learning sustainable, PUSD deployed a massive effort to educate and engage the community. They developed a suite of informational materials explaining the benefits of Linked Learning. Students and school board members served as Linked Learning ambassadors, bringing these materials to families, civic leaders, industry partners, and others. PUSD hired business liaisons to develop partnerships cultivating work-based learning opportunities, such as guest speakers, field trips, mock interviews, job shadows, and teacher externships. All of these activities fostered a sense of ownership beyond the early champions, and helped weave Linked Learning into the fabric of the community.

Outcomes

In addition to increasing academic success, and the community fully embracing Linked Learning:

- The Jet Propulsion Lab took to their formal structure a proposal to adopt John Muir as a school, and is in the process of identifying mentors, internships, and job shadowing opportunities.
- When one advisory group noticed low internship participation among African American males, they devised a mentorship program pairing industry partners with ninth graders to build relationships early.
- An advisory group held a Dress for Success fundraiser to help provide students with professional attire for the workplace.

The dropout rate at John Muir High School fell from 34percent in 2008 to 9 percent in 2010, and academic performance increased across all demographic groups.