

The Problem

California has the 8th largest economy in the world and has the potential to remain a global leader across multiple industry sectors. However, the state will need to produce an additional 1 million career-ready college graduates by 2025 to meet the needs of employers.

Unfortunately, the reality is that a majority of students in California face a different future. Today, only 40 percent of California's 2.2 million young adults (ages 25-34) hold an associate's degree or higher, and many do not have the skills needed to succeed in the workforce. This challenge begins long before students are in college: only 15 percent of students graduate from high school prepared for college. The reality is even bleaker for low-income students and student of color. In California, fewer than 10 percent of low-income adults hold a postsecondary degree, and even fewer are employed in a career that pays a sustaining wage.¹ Similar gaps in attainment exist for students of color. In a state where 55 percent of students in public schools are from low-income families and 60 percent are students of color, the educational and career outcomes of these students are inextricably linked to the future of California.

The Solution: Linked Learning

Linked Learning is helping better prepare California students to graduate from high school ready for college, and to thrive in the workplace. Linked Learning is a successful approach to education based on the idea that students work harder and dream bigger if their education is relevant to them. The approach integrates rigorous academics that meet college-ready standards with sequenced, high-quality career-technical education, work-based learning, and supports to help students stay on track.

Linked Learning ensures that students graduate with a foundation of experiences, competencies, and confidence that they'll need to succeed in college and career—ready to contribute meaningfully to California's economy and society. Linked Learning students attend pathways organized around an industry-sector theme, taught by teachers who collaborate with each other and incorporate input from industry professionals. This makes learning more like the real world of work, and helps students answer the question, "Why do I need to know this?" The Linked Learning approach can be delivered through a variety of models, including NAF Academies, California Partnership Academies, industry-themed small schools, or through a variety of pathways in large comprehensive high schools. Districts can implement Linked Learning as a systemic organizing principle for improving high school quality. Emerging regional-level work is aimed at extending Linked Learning into students' postsecondary experience.

Research shows that, compared with their peers, students in certified Linked Learning pathways earn more credits in the first three years of high school, report greater confidence in their life and career skills, and say they are experiencing more rigorous, integrated, and relevant instruction. The data also show that students coming into Linked Learning with low prior achievement were less likely to drop out, completed more a-g courses, and had higher GPAs than similar students enrolled in traditional high schools.

Linked Learning, compared with other educational approaches, is unique in the following ways:

- 1) **It's about college AND career.** Linked Learning is defined by a central commitment to college *and* career success for all students.
- 2) **It's driven by four core integrated components.** Students are provided with an educational experience that integrates:
 - **Rigorous academics** that prepare students to take college courses and meet the admission standards of California's public universities
 - **Sequence of high-quality career-technical education courses** that deliver concrete knowledge and skills, emphasizing real-world applications of academic learning
 - **Work-based learning in real-world workplaces** via job shadowing, apprenticeships, internships, and other professional skill-building opportunities
 - **Comprehensive supports and services** that are embedded as central components of a program of study to ensure that all students stay on track and graduate ready to transition to the next phase of their education or career

¹ Based on national average that 8 percent of low-income students graduate with a college credential.

- 3) **It's an approach, not a program.** Linked Learning is not a standalone program, but rather an integrated, systemic approach involving collaboration between educators, employers, and community leaders. Linked Learning is a strategy for transforming education and regional economic development. Implementing Linked Learning successfully can require systemic change at the classroom, school, district, and regional levels.
- 4) **It's for all students.** Linked Learning is the right fit for students of all achievement levels and aspirations, with an essential commitment to equity and a focus on improving postsecondary and employment outcomes for all students, including students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds.

The Vision for the Future of Linked Learning

The Linked Learning field has come a long way since its inception more than 10 years ago. Districts across California that have embraced Linked Learning have seen their students flourish. Now, with a foundation of investment from the state, establishment of consortiums of K-12 districts, postsecondary institutions, and employers, and increasing interest from industry leaders, community partners, educators, parents, and students, Linked Learning is rapidly expanding across California. At this moment, an important challenge for the field is to ensure that this massive increase in scale is accompanied by a commitment to pathway quality since better student outcomes are only seen in pathways that implement Linked Learning with fidelity to the four core components.

The Linked Learning Alliance and partner leaders of the Linked Learning field are collaborating on a multifaceted plan to guide the Linked Learning movement over the next five years with the ultimate goal of ensuring that more students in California, particularly underserved students, benefit from the Linked Learning approach, ultimately earning a college degree and/or professional credential, and entering financially sustainable and personally-relevant careers. The central focus of this effort is a clear emphasis on pathway quality, while concurrently increasing demand for Linked Learning graduates.

The Linked Learning field leaders have identified a series of interconnected milestone goals towards realization of the vision:

- 1) Build greater demand for quality Linked Learning among districts and postsecondary institutions by demonstrating how Linked Learning can support successful student outcomes
- 2) Build greater demand for Linked Learning graduates from employers and postsecondary institutions
- 3) Drive improvement in practice through effective and scalable technical assistance, learning communities, and best-practice sharing
- 4) Better understand and improve the Linked Learning model through measurement of and research on the connection between specific practices and student outcomes
- 5) Test the efficacy of the regional model to achieve improved student outcomes and accelerate scale
- 6) Establish quality standards and assessment systems to define and measure high-quality Linked Learning, and develop data standards that support measurement of Linked Learning practices and outcomes across multiple systems
- 7) Develop a clear and sustainable means of stewarding and governing the field's ongoing success and growth

So that by the year 2020:

- 1) There is increased demand for Linked Learning from districts, postsecondary institutions, and employers, who all see it as clearly-aligned with their own success (e.g. LCAP, community college/CSU/UC student success, employer hiring);
- 2) The field is able to measure inputs and outcomes, and has a means of validating and supporting high-quality implementation and improvements of Linked Learning at scale; that means is widely accepted and used;
- 3) There are regional exemplars (multiple districts with interconnected downstream postsecondary and employment partners) in place and, through these, the field gets clearer on how to unlock greater scale of high-quality Linked Learning;
- 4) Policy and funding streams (local, state-wide, philanthropic, and private) support scale and sustainability of what works; and
- 5) The field has a means of stewarding and governing its own ongoing success and growth and operating with shared voice and mutual accountability.

We can achieve these goals if they are co-owned by the Linked Learning field and the work to accomplish them is acknowledged as a collective effort. Additionally, achieving these goals will require depth of knowledge about Linked Learning within and across organizations involved in this work. Therefore, each organization committed to this vision should consider how aligned these field goals are with their own organization's mission and goals, and internal training and onboarding practices.

Talking Points About the Future Vision for Linked Learning

The Problem:

- California has the 8th largest economy in the world, and has the potential to remain a global leader across multiple industry sectors. However, the state will need to produce an additional 1 million career-ready college graduates by 2025 to meet the needs of employers. Only 15 percent of students graduate from high school prepared for college success, and the reality is even bleaker for low-income students and student of color, which describes the majority of California's student population.

The Promise:

- Linked Learning is helping to address California's need to better prepare students to graduate from high school ready for college, and with skills needed to thrive in the workplace. Linked Learning is a successful approach to education based on the idea that students work harder and dream bigger if their education is relevant to them. It integrates rigorous academics that meet college-ready standards with sequenced, high-quality career-technical education, work-based learning, and supports to help students stay on track.
- Linked Learning students attend pathways organized around industry-sector themes, taught by teachers who collaborate with each other and incorporate input from industry professionals. This makes learning more like the real world of work, and helps students answer the question, "Why do I need to know this?"
- Research shows that, compared with their peers, students in certified Linked Learning pathways earn more credits in the first three years of high school, report greater confidence in their life and career skills, and say they are experiencing more rigorous, integrated, and relevant instruction. The data also show that students coming into Linked Learning with low prior achievement were less likely to drop out, completed more a-g courses, and had higher GPAs than similar students enrolled in traditional high schools. Linked Learning students graduate with the skills and confidence needed to thrive in college and career, and to contribute meaningfully to California's economy and society.
- The Linked Learning approach can be delivered through a variety of models, including NAF Academies or California Partnership Academies, industry-themed small schools, or through a variety of pathways in large comprehensive high schools. Districts can implement Linked Learning as a systemic organizing principle for improving high school quality. Emerging regional-level work is aimed at extending Linked Learning into students' postsecondary experience.
- Over the past few years there has been exponential growth in the number of school districts across California that are offering or planning to offer Linked Learning opportunities to students. The field's challenge now is to meet this rapidly expanding demand with quality assurance systems and support because Linked Learning delivers better outcomes for students when it is implemented with fidelity to the four core components.

What Is Different About Linked Learning:

- 1) **It's about college AND career.** Linked Learning is defined by a central commitment to college *and* career success for all students.

- 2) **It's driven by four core integrated components.** Students are provided with an educational experience that integrates:
 - **Rigorous academics** that prepare students to take college courses and meet the admission standards of California's public universities
 - **Sequence of high-quality career-technical education courses** that deliver concrete knowledge and skills, emphasizing real-world applications of academic learning
 - **Work-based learning in real-world workplaces** via job shadowing, apprenticeships, internships, and other professional skill-building opportunities
 - **Comprehensive supports and services** that are embedded as central components of a program of study to ensure that all students stay on track and graduate ready to transition to the next phase of their education or career
- 3) **It's an approach, not a program.** Linked Learning is not a standalone program, but rather an integrated, systemic approach involving collaboration between educators, employers, and community leaders. Linked Learning is a strategy for transforming education and regional economic development. Implementing Linked Learning successfully can require systemic change at the classroom, school, district, and regional levels.
- 4) **It's for all students.** Linked Learning is the right fit for students of all achievement levels and aspirations, with an essential commitment to equity and a focus on improving postsecondary and employment outcomes for all students, including students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds.

The Vision for the Future of Linked Learning:

- Linked Learning has the potential to achieve the best outcomes for our students and for our state's economy, and we seek to make Linked Learning a permanent, sustainable pillar of education across California, and beyond.
- The Linked Learning movement is owned by the field, with many partners working together to expand and improve high-quality Linked Learning opportunities for students.
- Because of the mounting evidence of effectiveness of the Linked Learning approach, as well as the strategic investments from the James Irvine Foundation to establish a multifaceted field of support, the State of California has committed approximately \$2 billion to help schools and regions establish and expand Linked Learning pathways. This has resulted in exponential growth in the number of school districts across California that are offering or planning to offer Linked Learning opportunities to students. The field's challenge now is to meet this rapidly expanding demand with systems and support that incentivize, recognize, and result in quality implementation.
- The Linked Learning Alliance and partner leaders of the Linked Learning field are collaborating on a multifaceted plan to guide the Linked Learning movement over the next five years with the ultimate goal of ensuring that more students in California, particularly underserved students, benefit from the approach, ultimately earning a college degree or career credential, and entering financially sustainable and personally-relevant careers. The central focus of this effort is a clear emphasis on pathway quality, while concurrently increasing demand for Linked Learning graduates.
- To get there, we are focused on these key goals:
 - Increase demand for high-quality Linked Learning among K-12 districts by increasing demand for Linked Learning graduates among postsecondary institutions and employers;
 - Develop a system of quality assurance and a network of capacity-building to support high-quality implementation of Linked Learning at scale;
 - Continue to understand and support improvements in practice through data collection and analysis;
 - Develop a roadmap for greater scale of high-quality Linked Learning at the regional level; and
 - Ensure that the field has means to sustain the multifaceted systems of support, delivery, quality assurance, and demand that are critical to long-term viability and validity of this movement.