

A SUMMER LIKE NO OTHER

Accelerating Learning for High School Students

New funds for educational recovery from the pandemic present a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get student learning on track and our educational systems in shape to better serve all students. To be effective, steps forward must start this summer.

The coronavirus pandemic—with its waves of closures and quarantines, high-speed pivots to distance learning, and devastating societal effects—has disrupted education patterns for all students, especially those in high school, in unimaginable ways over the past school year. We have already seen this play out in school districts across the country: Far too many high schoolers are opting out of returning to school at all, even after educators have opened their classroom doors.



Disruption has serious effects. [Research shows](#) that in the wake of school closures following natural disasters—such as Hurricanes Katrina and Maria—14 percent to 20 percent of students never returned to school; researchers estimate an additional two percent to nine percent of high school students could drop out as a result of the current pandemic and associated school closures. And high school students are indeed feeling burnt out. A recent [national survey](#) shows that only 45 percent of secondary school students said they often or very often feel energized, compared with 71 percent of elementary school students.

Amid all this change, there is well-founded worry: *How can we reconnect and help students stay on track with their learning and their aspirations for the future?* However, there is also new hope: With new resources, elevated public will, creative thinking, and good evidence on what works, we can reengage students and redesign our educational system to better serve all students beginning this summer.

We can do better than simply recover. Right now, the federal and state governments are investing billions of dollars in public education to address the steep challenges students and families are facing. Highly flexible federal funding from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and state-based funding from [AB 86](#) in California can be used to provide expanded learning opportunities and social-emotional supports through August 2021. Nearly any strategy that connects to social, emotional, and academic learning goals and needs qualifies, including using the funds to pay students for opportunities to learn while earning money this summer. This newfound flexibility will allow schools to move beyond credit remediation and recovery offerings to also include opportunities that reengage and energize our most disconnected and historically marginalized students.

It All Begins This Summer

School districts have access to this unprecedented funding starting now—summer 2021—through at least summer 2023. Now is the time to redefine systems to ensure high school students are seen, engaged, and connected to their purpose, while laying the groundwork for systems-level change this fall.

In this historic moment, school leaders must:

- Meet students where they are in this moment, including meaningfully incentivizing student engagement with stipends and other assets, and providing more integrated social-emotional and mental health supports.
- Think creatively and expansively about how to define “expanded learning” for high school students.*
- Leverage existing approaches, structures, and networks—such as Linked Learning, existing after school and summer programs, Community Schools—to build more integrated and coordinated systems and maximize impact.
- Increase the breadth and depth of regional and community partners to address the social-emotional needs of students and provide them the benefits of work-based learning.

Expanded Learning and Linked Learning

Learning is more meaningful when it connects with young people—and connects them to the world. Linked Learning is an approach to education that helps each student discover their passions and gain the confidence and support they need to succeed in high school, and to graduate with the experiences, coursework, and skills that prepare them for success in college, career, and life. Expanded learning is an aligned strategy designed to extend those opportunities beyond the traditional school day. When delivered together, each is amplified to ensure even more powerful student-centered learning experiences are available to all young people. Mutually beneficial strategies, Linked Learning achieves priorities at the heart of expanded learning through:

- Student-centered educational experiences driven by student agency that extend beyond the classroom and connect to community, e.g., opportunities for project-based and real-work learning experiences that build students’ social capital.
- Expanded, restructured learning outside of the confines of the school day that rethink how to value and credit learning beyond seat time and employ creative approaches to scheduling that offers high school students more flexibility for work-based learning experiences and accelerated college opportunities, such as dual enrollment.
- Strong, meaningful relationships between young people and adults. In the context of Linked Learning, relationship development happens through a pathway structure, where students learn as part of a cohort with a dedicated team of teachers, counselors, and site administrators.

Learn more about the [Linked Learning](#) and [expanded learning](#) approaches.

* California’s [definition of “expanded learning”](#) means before school, after school, summer, or intersession learning programs that focus on developing the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of pupils through hands-on, engaging learning experiences. It is the intent of the State Legislature that expanded learning programs are pupil-centered, results driven, include community partners, and complement, but do not replicate, learning activities in the regular school day and school year.

Driving Recovery for Students and California

If California wants a strong recovery from the pandemic, we cannot afford to have our educational and workforce systems return to the status quo—or worse, backtrack on pre-pandemic progress. Now is the time to redefine these systems to meet the needs of our young people and our future. It begins this summer with quick and strategic action to ensure students are seen, engaged, and connected to their purpose.

Priority Areas for Action

Here the [Linked Learning Alliance](#) and [Partnership for Children & Youth](#) outline five areas for action—practical, scalable solutions that every education decision maker should consider right now, and as we move forward. The first three action areas include strategies that California school districts can implement right now, in summer 2021. We also offer two additional areas for action that districts can begin to implement now to provide a foundation for driving systems change through the 2021–2022 school year. In the pages that follow, we offer further details, examples, and resources to support each of these action areas.

Action Areas for Immediate Adoption and Impact

1. **Listen to students to engage them and their insights.** We can learn from students and amplify their voices to inform policy and practice so that solutions are student-centered, relevant, and motivating.
2. **Foster relevancy and early career exposure through summer work-based learning.** We can develop paid work-based learning experiences that allow students to explore a range of careers, while also developing skills in career navigation and professionalism by collaborating with community-based organizations and industry partners.
3. **Connect rich and relevant learning to community.** We can create engaging, hands-on learning experiences that encourage creativity, agency, exploration of interests, and meaningful and deep learning for students and educators.

Action Areas to Drive Systems Change and Improve Longer-term Student Outcomes

4. **Design and activate networks that accelerate learning this summer and beyond.** We can build from and break down silos between existing education systems into dynamic networks of educators and other partners who together can advocate for and quickly accelerate student learning.
5. **Strengthen and enrich student experiences through a continuum of integrated supports.** We can build rich and nurturing relationships of support and care among students, families, educators, and community partners.

Action Areas for Immediate Adoption and Impact

1. Listen to students to engage them and their insights.

In the upheaval created by the coronavirus pandemic, school district administrators and teachers have worked hard to track down a dispersed student body. Far too many young people are not attending class, turning in assignments, or engaging with schools at all. High school educators, in particular, report steep declines in their students' motivation. Students need help navigating this catastrophic moment, and to provide the right help, we need to understand their realities fully—and that takes listening. Through listening activities, we have learned that students immersed in rich work-based learning programs that stopped due to social distancing protocols were devastated—and this feedback points us forward. By reaching out to students now and over the summer, we can engage them and help ensure our investments in their success are relevant and motivating.

- Use strategic communications to interview, capture, and share the voices and concerns of our state's high school juniors and seniors, and document their perspectives and stories at this critical juncture in their transition toward postsecondary education and careers.
- Launch a local “youth voice” campaign to weave these voices into a powerful narrative that clarifies the concerns as well as the continued hopes and dreams of this generation.
- Strategically share these voices with key stakeholders and policymakers at the local and state levels, empowering young people to be strong advocates for themselves and their futures.
- Leverage student voices with industry partners to ensure continuity of their educational and work-based learning experiences; further, incorporate the voices of industry partners to inspire other employers to step up and connect with juniors and seniors in college and career pathways.

CALIFORNIA EXAMPLES IN ACTION:

Capturing Student Perspectives

In a [survey last summer](#), the Linked Learning Alliance reached out to 1,300 high school juniors and seniors to ask them how they were doing, and what they wanted and needed most. Students shared that they were struggling but showing incredible resilience. They said that one of the things they wanted most was someone to talk to—including peers, business mentors, and other trusted adults. They also expressed that they valued and prioritized virtual work-based learning experiences in particular.

As schools and districts begin to reopen their doors and restart on-campus learning, we must ensure students are at the forefront of policymaking conversations. To that end, the Linked Learning Alliance is asking students to [share their stories](#).

2. Foster relevancy and early career exposure through summer work-based learning.

During the pandemic, many students have been forced to make exceedingly hard decisions. *Do I focus on school or work to support my family? Do I postpone college to bring in much-needed income?* Such decisions will continue to impact their plans for the future. Schools and districts can respond to this situation in a way that addresses students' academic and economic needs.

Research shows that access to work-based learning opportunities like internships and apprenticeships in high school is associated with [higher quality jobs a decade later](#) for young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds. Further, research finds that experiences in the labor market during the teen years predict higher job quality in adulthood, suggesting that such early exposure leads to rewarding careers and upward social mobility.

Over the summer months, schools and districts can reengage students with expanded and paid work-based learning opportunities that are relevant, engaging, and cultivate students' career aspirations. Public funds can be used to expose students to quality experiences via job shadows, apprenticeships, internships, and other work-based learning opportunities that teach students the professional skills and dispositions needed to thrive in college and careers. We can use this summer to:

- Kick off student access to a continuum of increasingly intensive work-based learning experiences from career exploration to career training, all tied to academic coursework.
- Provide ample opportunities for young people to earn and learn. Leverage funds to provide paid internships at scale.



Check out this [tip sheet](#) on providing high school students with opportunities to learn and earn—through stipend or hourly wage.

- Offer “in-house” internship opportunities within school districts or partner with other government agencies in fields associated with pathway industries.
- Build local advisory boards made up of school administrators, pathway faculty, and industry partners that can provide professional mentors to young people and build students' social capital and professional networks.

California Examples in Action:

Internships and Other Work-Based Learning Experiences

In San Bernardino City Unified School District, students select from 34 educational pathways connected to industry sectors including transportation, manufacturing, agricultural technology, and health sciences. Meanwhile, the county is now expanding its [micro-internship program](#), which virtually pairs small groups of students with an industry partner for 90-minute sessions focused on one skill for success in the given field. The county makes a variety of [tools and resources](#) available to support implementation.

[The ROSE Program](#) in Pasadena partners with the Pasadena Unified School District to offer paid internship opportunities to low- and moderate-income students.

Fresno Unified School District has a comprehensive [work-based learning toolkit and resource guide](#) that can help districts begin to develop a continuum of high-quality student experiences linked to college and career.

Each year, more than a thousand students in Oakland Unified School District immerse in healthcare-themed learning through an innovative partnership between OUSD and two of the region's major public health entities. This project, studied by SRI International, has generated positive results and lessons captured in a [series of reports](#).

[SJ Works](#) is an internship program led by the San Jose Mayor's Office in partnership with schools, employers, and community-based organizations to provide over 250 summer youth employment opportunities, along with a complement of curricula focused on academics, job readiness, financial literacy, career exploration, and more. Initially a public response to gang activity and low employment, the program has evolved with student feedback and community involvement. The demand for such youth employment opportunities far exceeds the need; SJ Works has a waiting list of hundreds of students every summer.

Sacramento City Unified School District fights summer learning loss through free [Summer Matters @SCUSD](#) programs, including a Youth Employment Program for incoming juniors and seniors. This program is designed to accelerate classroom learning and give students opportunities to reconnect with learning communities, while earning summer income. SCUSD also partners with the City of Sacramento to provide a six-week internship where students learn about pressing local issues and deepen their networks while earning five high school credits and a stipend. Due to increased needs and resources this summer, SCUSD significantly expanded its Summer [Ambassadors/Peer Mentors program](#). In this program, the district hires rising high school juniors and seniors to serve as peer mentors, leading activities and providing supervision at over 25 elementary and middle school summer program sites—a double win for the district. These positions are paid, \$14 per hour for 20 hours a week, throughout the summer. SCUSD had planned to accept applications over two weeks but had to close the process early when it received 200 applications in two days.

Los Angeles Unified School District employs a variety of tools and programs to expand partnerships for authentic, classroom connected work-based learning. [Nepris](#) is a web-based platform that provides CTE/Linked Learning teachers the ability to request and connect with industry professionals both locally and nationally. [Defined Careers](#) is a library providing hands-on, industry-aligned project-based lessons that encourage cross-disciplinary alignment. [Portfolioium](#) is a digital portfolio tool that helps students display their strengths, interact with professionals, and build their professional identities.

3. Connect rich and relevant learning to community.

Now is an important time for students to “learn by doing,” reflect on their experiences, and help solve community problems through partnerships that bring them together with community partners. Research finds that such project-based learning strengthens student engagement, improves information retention, increases student achievement, and has [positive effects on students](#) from all backgrounds. Schools and community-based organizations can use COVID relief and recovery dollars to make summer learning experiences hands-on and more meaningful to students and teachers alike. Specifically, we recommend:

- Let teachers lead the thinking—especially those who are closest to students and understand students’ passions and interests in college and career. Ask these educators for simple proposals for hands-on learning opportunities, summer camps, and labs to reinvigorate passions for teaching and learning.
- Engage advisory boards to help develop summer projects that integrate real-world applications of pathway themes connected to growing and emerging industries.
- Provide opportunities for students to tackle real-world challenges that they care about. Districts can leverage federal funds to embed career exploration and 21st century skills development into summer school programs.
- Pilot performance-based assessments and other alternative or complementary practices. Implement immediately in summer school settings.

California Examples in Action:

Community Connections

Porterville Unified School District issued a request for proposals to their teachers, soliciting ideas and offering funding for expanded summer learning opportunities for students to grow through real work experiences. Teachers were invited to think creatively and apply their passion for specific topics and skills when designing engaging offerings for young people, which energized both educators and students about teaching and learning. Examples include welding, computer coding, culinary arts, environmental science, and insect taxonomy and identification, among others. These skill camps are designed to run for approximately six hours a day for five days, giving students a crash course in a specific subject tied to their pathway of study.

In Oakland Unified School District, Linked Learning students complete a capstone project, aligned with the district’s [Graduate Profile](#), on a topic of their choosing. Students define a research question, conduct literary and/or field research, write a formal research paper, and then present their process and findings to peers, teachers, and community members. This culminating experience helps students develop deep content knowledge in an area of interest, typically focused on a challenge facing their community, as well as hone high-order skills needed for success in college and the workplace, such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and inquiry.

The STEM Academy of Hollywood, a Linked Learning Gold certified pathway, provides a holistic, career-relevant assessment system that includes interdisciplinary projects throughout high school and culminates in a senior portfolio and defense of learning. Students in Thrive Academy, a three-week summer school program for seventh and eighth graders from LeConte Middle School and ninth and tenth graders from STEM Academy, go through an intensive public health curriculum centered on their own community. The program culminates in a [final advocacy project](#) presented on the last day. Industry partners from Kaiser are fully integrated into the design and implementation of the project and the assessment of student learning, which can take place in virtual, hybrid, and in-person learning formats.

As part of the County Youth Bridges Program, Los Angeles County youth residents ages 14 to 24 that have the right to work in the United States—including many students in Antelope Valley Union High School District (AVUHSD)—are eligible to apply for the [Youth@Work](#) program administered by the Los Angeles Workforce Development Aging and Community Services and the America’s Job Centers of California. Through Youth@Work, eligible participants can receive 120 hours of personal enrichment training and experience; earn \$15 per hour; have the opportunity to work for a variety of employers in the public, private, or nonprofit sectors—with the potential for long-term employment options and training. During 2020–2021, the program pivoted to a virtual experience including access to the Career Edge platform. AVUHSD encourages all of its students in Linked Learning/CTE pathways to apply to this program in order to scale up work-based learning experiences. The school district also hires recent graduates as pathway course tutors and creators of supplemental materials to be used with current students during the summer and school year. This practice enables recent graduates to support their community, earn income, and remain connected to educators and supportive adults even after graduation.

Linked Learning pathways encourage young people to develop the self-agency and motivation to advocate for themselves and their communities. For example, students in Linked Learning pathways are working toward [climate action](#), redesigning COVID-safe classrooms, and advancing [social justice and racial equity](#) in their communities through civic action projects. In Los Angeles Unified School District, Linked Learning leaders encourage their teams to connect service learning to the world of work. Students have developed many passions during the pandemic, and in many cases, this involves giving back to their communities through service. Pathways can incentivize students to continue to explore their passions in a professional environment by connecting service-learning projects to work experience education and paying students to continue to pursue these projects alongside industry partners.



Action Areas to Drive Systems Change and Improve Longer-term Student Outcomes

4. Design and activate networks that accelerate learning this summer and beyond.

The moment has come to build robust learning networks across California. The American Rescue Plan explicitly allows state and federal dollars to be applied toward networked approaches to continuous improvement. Networks within and across districts and higher education can share common problems and collectively address new challenges as they emerge to deliver the best possible education for California's youth. Educators are amazing problem solvers, especially when given the opportunity to innovate together. We can use this summer to:

- Cultivate existing networks of educators through online and in-person meetings and educator-led professional development opportunities with a shared focus on accelerating student learning.
- Launch new, cross-sector networks that include K–12, postsecondary, industry, and youth leaders to drive systems transformation amid constantly evolving teaching and learning priorities, and changing funding environments.
- Bring educators and industry partners together to uncover and highlight promising strategies to address key issues such as sustainability, data use, state and local relationships, cross-sector partnerships, and operationalizing educational equity within the context of the COVID-19 recovery.
- Engage networks of educators in conversations around developing a shared vision for the students they serve and how they can start to bring that vision to life.

California Examples in Action:

District Networks and Communities of Fellows

School districts that were funded under the California Linked Learning District Initiative formed a community of practice, bringing together the nine K–12 school districts, institutions, employers, and community-based organizations to scale and elevate the quality of Linked Learning in their educational systems. Building on the successes of this collaborative systems-level network, the Linked Learning Alliance launched the [Linked Learning Fellows program](#). The program engages highly experienced education practitioners who are growing their networks and impact through collaboration and sharing best practices for transforming programs, systems, and policies to ignite students' college and career ambitions.

Los Angeles Unified School District recently launched its own [Linked Learning Fellows program](#) to enable groups of educators to cultivate connections across this large urban district and strengthen the whole system as participants share information and learn from one another.

5. Strengthen and enrich student experiences through a continuum of integrated supports.

[Student supports](#) are an integral part of Linked Learning and other types of expanded learning experiences in recognition that students come to school with different needs and assets, and that transitions through each stage of learning can be especially daunting for those with less privilege. Student supports are, therefore, an important driver for equity in education.

Such supports are often defined by the kind of smaller learning communities created by a cohort of students, journeying together through an educational pathway—and by a dedicated community of adults who can provide guidance and affirmation along the way. Students express that they deeply value the connections made through such learning communities. And indeed, relationships with teachers, counselors, and industry partners proved critical through pandemic school closures and should remain a priority as schooling evolves.

Now is the time to enhance relationships that already exist and establish new ones with students who may need to be brought back into the learning community. Recognizing and providing the supports students need will be critical over the summer months and as schools fully reopen in the fall. Helpfully, the surge in public funding for K–12 can be used to “address the mental health needs of students, including through using funds to hire counselors and other staff” and can be applied to expand existing offerings over summer hours and months, with flexible scheduling that accommodates students. Right now, local education leaders can:

- Begin to integrate some or all components of the research-backed [Linked Learning and Community Schools frameworks](#) into summer learning offerings.
- Convene a network across segments, dedicated to consulting on data and creating new ways to develop blended counseling models (e.g., K–12 school districts and community colleges employing the Linked Learning framework).
- Engage any existing counseling staff and community organizations in providing academic as well as mental health support for students dealing with the stresses and traumas of the pandemic. Hire additional counselors, work-based learning/postsecondary coordinators, and other staff who can address these pressures on students. Longer term, sites can establish wellness centers, peer-to-peer support offerings, or practices that support the variety of student needs.
- Address the transitional needs of students whose educations were impacted by COVID-19, but who are now leaving the K–12 space. These students were unable to receive the same types of targeted, integrated academic and social emotional supports that their peers before or after them received. By including this group of students in the district's focus, educators can ensure that an entire cohort is not left out of the recovery process.
- Engage educators and stakeholders to explore creative enhancements to existing educational structures that support student learning and experiences, such as master scheduling that embeds Work Experience Education. For example, LAUSD is creating classes that give students access to *learn and earn* opportunities. When paired with a CTE Capstone, Work Experience Education classes can have a powerful impact on students and their ability to see themselves in careers they are learning about.

California Examples in Action:

Built-in Support

Oakland High School in Oakland Unified School District integrates the Community Schools model with Linked Learning by creating small learning communities within the larger school. Each small community is assigned a case carrier, counselor, and administrator who communicate and collaborate to support students both academically and socio-emotionally and ensure they have access to necessary wraparound services. Through partnership with local community-based organizations, such as EBAYC, the school provides a centralized wellness center, [Shop 55](#), that addresses students' mental and physical health, developmental, and academic needs.

Educators at John O'Connell High School in San Francisco's Mission neighborhood within the San Francisco Unified School District recognized that the student supports provided were not always well aligned with the learning objectives of their college and career pathways. They saw that the "opt-in" approach to student services—with supports provided before school, after school, and during breaks in the school day—often had the unintended effect of reproducing patterns of social and racial stratification. To make dramatic improvements toward their equity goals, they reconceived and integrated the role of teachers, counselors, and community-based partners as "student success coaches." These changes were rooted in a vision by which every student would have a coherent experience of support where at least one adult bonded with them, advocated for their academic success, and served as a bridge to learning and work beyond high school.

At Wilson High School in Long Beach Unified School District, [triad teams](#) made up of a lead pathway teacher, an administrator, and a counselor work together efficiently and share responsibility to enhance student experiences. These educators form relationships with students, collaboratively plan during structured meeting times, and review data quarterly to address student needs.

Porterville Unified School District created a [work-based learning/postsecondary specialist](#) position. This integral staff member is responsible for providing development and training opportunities for current students, and assists in the development of pathway programs, project management, and strategies to advance a work-based learning continuum of activities in coordination with a seamless set of early college opportunities.



Summer Learning Gains

With intentional steps, this can and should be a summer like no other. This should be the summer where we lay the foundation for redesigning, reimagining, and re-engaging to come back better. We have the urgency, insights, and support to accelerate student learning on the path toward a strong 2021–2022 and a stronger educational and workforce system for the future of California.

Contact us to ask questions, share ideas, and explore the possibilities together.



The Linked Learning Alliance leads a coalition of educators, employers, and community organizers who are advancing equity and excellence in education through Linked Learning, an approach proven to help more students stay in school, graduate on time, and develop skills employers seek for the future. linkedlearning.org



Partnership for Children & Youth (PCY) is an advocacy and capacity-building organization championing high-quality, equitable learning opportunities for underserved youth in California. PCY trains school and community-based educators, facilitates relationships between schools and community-based organizations, and advocates for effective public policies and resources. For over 20 years, PCY has led research, training, policy, and advocacy to improve access and quality of expanded learning opportunities across the state. partnerforchildren.org

APPENDIX: Tools and Resources

[Quality Standards for Expanded Learning in California](#)

In 2014, the California Department of Education adopted 12 quality standards helping to define expanded learning for our state. This resource provides descriptions of each standard in practice at the programmatic, staff, and participant levels.

[2021 Summer Learning Guide](#)

This guide provides ideas, resources, and best practices for the design and implementation of summer learning programs, with adaptations emerging from the pandemic. The guide was authored by the Partnership for Children & Youth, National Summer Learning Association.

[Summer Learning Toolkit](#)

This kit, offered by the Wallace Foundation, provides evidence-based tools, templates, and guidance for delivering effective summer programs.