

FactSheet March 2014

Linked Learning *SCOPE Case Study: Sacramento*

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) is an equity-focused framework that will likely guide California education decisions going forward. The LCFF includes a strong accountability emphasis, including a requirement that districts develop Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP) that include a variety of goals and measurable objectives. Linked Learning is a particularly well-suited to help districts meet their goals for diverse student populations.

The Linked Learning approach to high school reform is also based on the principle of equity. The fundamental goal is to increase postsecondary opportunities for all students by integrating rigorous A-G academics with career-themed instruction and work-based learning. The approach provides relevant and motivating education experiences to high school students¹ by connecting learning to real-world situations through a range of career-oriented pathways. Although the approach is relatively new, initial student outcomes are promising. The successful design, implementation and support of Linked Learning requires a strong commitment to the approach and thoughtful and intensive collaboration among school, district and community stakeholders.

This fact sheet summarizes the findings reported in a case study conducted by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE)², *Linked Learning in Sacramento: Organizing the District and Community for Sustainable Reform*. The evaluation case study was informed by (1) interviews with district, site, and community leaders conducted between September 2009 and September 2011, (2) observations of a range of learning and professional development activities, (3) review of essential documents, and (4) informal communications with participants in the Initiative's District Leadership Series³.

The case study findings focus on the importance of setting direction and building leadership within the district for Linked Learning implementation. The authors describe how district officials pursued the Linked Learning approach as a means to counter staggering dropout rates and low test scores in

the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). The reform has been successful and sustainable as a result of building upon previous reform strategies, developing effective leadership and strategic coherence throughout the district and deepening the commitment to and implementation of Linked Learning at the school site level.

Findings

District and community context

- » 71 percent of SCUSD students qualified for free and reduced meals during the 2010-11 year.
- » District dropout rates averaged 22.6 percent between 1996 and 2000, and were much worse for certain groups.
- » The great recession hit harder in Sacramento than in many other major California cities. At the time of the study, Sacramento had an unemployment rate of nearly 13 percent and an average family income that was \$15,000 less than the average Californian household.

Four-year dropout rates at SCUSD small high schools in 2008-09 & 2011-12

	2008-09*	2011-2012
The MET	21.6%	13.8%
New Tech	19.1%	12.3%
Health Professions	15.9%	14.7%
School of Engineering & Sciences	N/A**	13.6%
George Washington Carver	56.4%***	8.5%

Source: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest> | * Last year of dropout data prior to Linked Learning implementation. | ** Dropout rates were not available for the School of Engineering and Sciences in 2008-09. | *** The calculations for GWC dropout data may be skewed due to district-charter transfers

Impetus for the Linked Learning approach

SCUSD’s “call to action” came in 1996 when community members formed a “Blue Ribbon Committee” to address high dropout rates, declining enrollment and the quality of graduates’ knowledge and skills.

The committee found that “high schools were too crowded, too big, too impersonal and incapable of preparing students for a world that [was] radically different than it was a half century ago.”⁴

The committee’s advice was to personalize students’ learning experiences through theme-based small learning communities with more intimate connections to educators.

The committee recommendations served as the basis for grant application through the Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York and their 21st Century High School Redesign Initiative—also known as the e21 Initiative. The grants were approved and the district received funding in 2001.

The goal of e21 was to replace large, comprehensive high schools with several small theme-based learning communities. However, the initiative lacked buy-in across the district and evaluations indicated little or no growth in student achievement.

District leaders felt that the Linked Learning approach offered a framework to address some of the challenges they had encountered.

SCUSD won a planning grant through The James Irvine Foundation in the fall of 2008, and a two-year \$1.2 million implementation grant in the fall of 2009. These grants allowed the district to implement Linked Learning at multiple school sites.

Building leadership and coherence across the district

- » Jonathan Raymond became the new superintendent right before the receipt of the Linked Learning implementation grant.
- » District layoffs and movement of key district personnel placed an added hardship on the district during the initial year of Linked Learning implementation.
- » Superintendent Raymond and district staff initially focused on four primary strategic actions that developed the leadership, culture and direction of Linked Learning across the district as described in the chart below.

Establish district leadership for Linked Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Establish a district Linked Learning team» Restructure district offices to incorporate Linked Learning across all departments» Provide ongoing training, coaching and leadership development opportunities
Integrate Linked Learning into a district-wide strategic planning for college and career readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Integrate Linked Learning into the district’s strategic plan» Develop a graduate profile around the Linked Learning approach
Establish coherence between Linked Learning and other district initiatives and priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Establish Linked Learning as the primary reform approach in the district» Strategically map out how Linked Learning connects with other district priorities and initiatives through outlining goals and desired outcomes for instruction, curriculum, and teacher collaboration
Extend leadership and support within the greater Sacramento community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Provide opportunities for business partners and other community stakeholders to serve on pathway advisory committees, as school sponsors, and in other capacities» Add to the district’s transparency, information sharing and overall community buy-in of Linked Learning through such outlets of engagement

Deepening the commitment and implementation at school sites

District leaders focused initial efforts to build staff buy-in for Linked Learning in three ways:

- » Creating effective messaging that characterized Linked Learning as a key strategy that builds upon previous reform efforts and integrates rigorous academics with career technical education.
- » Focusing on site-level leadership supports which included professional development, one-on-one supports and leadership courses for teachers and principals alike.
- » Developing pathway-level capacity for improving instruction and operations through ongoing professional development opportunities such as pathway leadership courses and mini-grants available to pathways for specific training needs—both geared towards integrating curriculum, work-based learning, scheduling and other elements of Linked Learning.

Conclusion

The SCOPE study of Linked Learning in the Sacramento City Unified School District concluded that pathway enrollment numbers and community support for Linked Learning continue to grow. In addition, early results indicate a decrease in the dropout rate at stand-alone Linked Learning high schools (Figure 1).

For further information

Sample board policy and administrative regulation BP/AP 6178 – Career Technical Education

“Linked Learning” supports college and career readiness, August 2012 Policy News <http://bit.ly/18KalwU>

CSBA joins work to link students with college and career opportunities, CSBA blog post, June 20, 2013 <http://bit.ly/15RtDDd>

Executive Committee sees successful Linked Learning programs in action, CSBA blog post, June 25, 2013 <http://bit.ly/1fSlGmL>

Golden Bell Award winners for the 2013 Career Technical Education category <http://bit.ly/1ai3zYu>