

A New Vision for Adolescent Learning and Well-Being



Source: Tony Bernard/Fresno Unified School District

California’s strategic investments in 21st century high school redesign—through community schools, dual enrollment, and career pathways programs—are accelerating innovative, student-centered transformation in pockets across the state. Common across all districts studied are four key practices: shared vision, steady work, symmetry, and “systemness”—in other words, these districts are places where goals are created as a community, where improvement happens over the long term, where leaders model core values, and where everyone sees themselves as integral to shaping the system. Demystifying what works across these districts crystallizes the next steps California can take to amplify these practices statewide: coordinating funding systems, committing to authentic assessment of deep learning, and creating structured networks between high-performing and emerging districts to spread innovation to all schools.

The United States high school is failing to serve many young people today, with adolescents experiencing disengagement, lack of purpose, and limited access to meaningful learning opportunities. However, a counternarrative is emerging in several California school systems, where system-wide strategies are being implemented to enhance learning and well-being in middle and high schools. In a forthcoming book from Corwin Press titled *Whole Learners, Whole Systems*, Sarah Fine, Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, and Michael Fullan examine the pioneering work of six education systems—Lindsay Unified, Oakland Unified, Fresno Unified, Shasta County Office of Education, Monterey Peninsula Unified, and Anaheim Union

High School District—that leveraged an influx of state funding to drive systemic transformations in secondary education. Collectively, these districts serve a diverse array of students and communities across race, ethnicity, household income, level of educational attainment, and geography (including urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout California).

With strong and sustained support from California statewide leadership, these six school systems are reimagining high school by integrating deep learning and well-being as foundational principles. By aligning instructional practices, support systems, and policy

structures, these districts developed innovative approaches that prioritize student agency, career-connected learning, and holistic development. Their work represents a shift away from traditional, test-driven models toward schools that foster purpose and belonging.

The commitment and imagination of educators is at the heart of the transformation happening in these school systems, which in many cases has been the result of steady work over a decade or more. In recent years, progress has been accelerated by the landmark vision and actions from state leaders who dedicated almost

\$5 billion through the \$4.1 billion California Community Schools Partnership Program, the \$200 million Dual Enrollment Opportunities Competitive Grant Program, and the \$500 million Golden State Pathways Program. These dollars provide resources to plan and implement a suite of research-based solutions that California has never before funded in such a concerted way.

Key Elements

The momentum of the school systems featured here is grounded in four key elements that are redefining the role of secondary schools as they enter the second quarter of the 21st century:



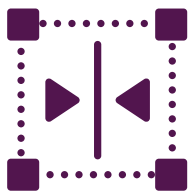
Shared Vision

Each school system established a co-created, compelling, clear, and coherent vision for secondary education. Stakeholder engagement—including educators, students, families, and community members—played a crucial role in defining and sustaining these visions.



Steady Work

Transformation was achieved through long-term commitment rather than short-term initiatives. These districts focused on continuous improvement, refining their approaches over time and resisting the lure of quick-fix solutions.



Symmetry

Leadership at every level modeled the values and practices expected in classrooms and schools, fostering coherence and reinforcing the importance of relational, student-centered education.



Systemness

A culture of collective responsibility and interconnectedness across all levels of the education system were intentionally cultivated, ensuring alignment between classroom practices and district-level strategies. Put simply, all parts pulled in the same direction.

Case Study Highlights

Shasta County Office Of Education

(with 24 districts and 3 small schools operated by the County Office) prioritized a whole child approach through initiatives like Community Connect, which integrates schools with social services to address barriers such as housing and mental health challenges.

Fresno Unified School District

developed a robust career and technical education ecosystem, offering students industry-aligned training and early exposure to career opportunities.

Lindsay Unified School District

implemented a competency-based education system where learning is personalized and students' progress is based on mastery rather than seat time.

Oakland Unified School District

restructured high schools around Linked Learning pathways, providing students with hands-on, real-world learning experiences connected to their personal purpose, their community, and the academic disciplines, while also embedding social-emotional support systems.

Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

combined district-wide support with school-level autonomy, allowing each school to innovate while maintaining a shared focus on student learning and well-being. With flexible, student-driven scheduling, the district empowers learners to tailor their educational experiences while fostering teacher collaboration and professional growth.

Anaheim Union High School District

focused on weaving together diverse educational initiatives into a cohesive system that fosters strong civic mindedness and ensures every student has access to college and career readiness opportunities.

Policy Recommendations

For California to sustain and scale these innovations, state policy must evolve to provide a more coherent and supportive framework. Key recommendations include:

- 1 Strengthen System Coherence, From Silos to Unified Strategy:** California's school districts are building coherent and compelling visions for student success. Now state agencies have the opportunity to align and streamline programs to unlock their full potential.
- 2 Expand Linked Learning and Career Pathways:** Linked Learning and pathways programs are enabling some districts to move beyond a false choice between college and career preparation—all while driving exceptional graduation rates. Now, the state is positioned to build regional career hubs and statewide support networks to ensure all districts can leverage the same transformative opportunities.
- 3 Invest in Mental Health and Whole Child Supports:** Districts are successfully transforming schools into community hubs that integrate mental health and family support services. The state can build on this momentum by ensuring every high school has dedicated mental health teams, creating sustainable funding streams, and expanding community schools funds to all high-need schools.
- 4 Redefine Readiness Through Competency-Based, Performance-Driven Accountability:** California can build on its success in establishing local control of funding and accountability by expanding accountability measures beyond test scores to include student portfolios, real-world projects, and graduate outcomes that better reflect readiness for 21st century careers and college.
- 5 Create a System for Innovation and Peer Learning:** California's innovation islands need bridges to spread successful practices across the state. The state can build bridges by funding and creating systematic channels to share what's already working and minimize policy swings and implementation barriers for districts.
- 6 Bridge Secondary and Postsecondary Systems, Align College Admissions with 21st Century Readiness:** California's high school redesign investments are creating innovative forms of student learning and assessment, but risk being constrained by misaligned college admissions criteria. The state can lead efforts to align K-12 outcomes with postsecondary expectations, ensuring that new demonstrations of learning are recognized and valued across the education continuum.

Conclusion

The pioneering systems featured in this report demonstrate that transformational change in high school is possible. By fostering system-wide coherence, sustaining long-term commitments, and redefining success metrics, California has an opportunity to become a national leader in secondary education reform. Scaling these efforts statewide will require proactive system-building, strategic investment, and a commitment to ensuring that every student has access to a high-quality, purpose-driven education. The evidence shows these approaches need continued support, including dedicated funding, to become the rule rather than the exception. The challenge ahead is not merely to replicate isolated innovations but to build a robust, interconnected system that prioritizes student thriving.

Through continued collaboration, adaptive leadership, and policy alignment, California can lead the way in shaping a new future for secondary education—one that empowers students to learn, grow, and contribute meaningfully to their communities and beyond. These six cases serve as harbingers of this transformation, providing an emerging evidence base for policy action that positions California at the forefront of secondary education innovation nationwide.

**This study was produced through extensive field research that included classroom observations, artifact analysis, and interviews with superintendents, school administrators, principals, classroom teachers, parents, and students. It was undertaken with Institutional Review Board approval from the University of California, San Diego.*