

A State Policy Roadmap to Reinvent California High Schools

California's strategic investments in 21st century high school redesign—through community schools, dual enrollment, and career pathways programs—are showing promising results in pockets across the state. Now, the state is well positioned to build on lessons learned by moving toward coordinated funding systems, committing to authentic assessment of deep learning, and building bridges from “innovation islands” to spread success to all schools in California.

The six school systems featured in a forthcoming book from Corwin Press, authored by Sarah Fine, Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, and Michael Fullan, offer a compelling guide for rethinking high school in California. Strategic investments in student well-being, career pathways, and instructional innovation have generated impressive models that work. If scaled up with continued statewide support, these efforts promise to transform the educational experiences for millions of California adolescents.

But policy conditions in California must continue to evolve to build on recent progress. Below are six key opportunities for state leaders to continue to transform education:

Policy Opportunities

- 1 Strengthen System Coherence: From Silos to Unified Strategy
- 2 Expand Linked Learning and Career Pathways
- 3 Invest in Mental Health and Whole Child Supports
- 4 Redefine Readiness Through Competency-Based, Performance-Driven Accountability
- 5 Create a System for Innovation and Peer Learning
- 6 Bridge Secondary and Postsecondary Systems: Align College Admissions with 21st Century Readiness



Source: Keith Rybaczyk/Fresno Unified School District

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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.

Current Progress: California state leadership has made remarkable progress and investments in K-12 education through the \$4.1 billion California Community Schools Partnership Program, the \$500 million Golden State Pathways Program, and the \$200 million Dual Enrollment Opportunities Competitive Grant Program. These landmark investments have furthered transformational systems change, as seen in places like Shasta County and Anaheim, which have leveraged the programs to create seamless networks of student and family services.

Implementation Barriers: Despite major investments and progress, policy implementation remains highly fragmented. State-funded initiatives are often administered separately, with little alignment. Districts are overwhelmed by administrative complexity: they deal with multiple, disconnected funding streams that require separate applications, compliance reports, and programmatic oversight.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Create a cross-agency task force to integrate policies** across the California Department of Education, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, California County Superintendents, and county offices of education. In doing so, the state should **establish a unified state framework for adolescent learning and well-being**.
- » **Integrate multiple priorities into a single, coherent framework** encompassing community schools work, expanded learning opportunities, mental health services, career pathways courses, academic improvement efforts, and student engagement strategies.
- » **Amend the state's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)** so the focus is less on compliance and more on providing a dynamic tool to help districts align state funding with local priorities. **Reduce bureaucratic burdens by integrating LCAP with other required state plans**, creating a single, streamlined accountability structure.
- » **Expand the capacity of county offices of education to serve as "system connectors" that bridge the gap between state policy and local implementation**, including by providing them with capacity-building grants to help districts integrate state-funded initiatives.
- » **Develop cross-sector partnerships** that include K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and community partners to ensure alignment of goals, language, and learner outcomes across student journeys.
- » **Establish a shared statewide framework for graduate competencies** that reflects the whole learner and guides assessment, instruction, and school design. Districts and schools should be supported in backward-mapping these competencies into graduation requirements, student learning experiences, and performance-based assessments.

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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.

Current Progress: The Golden State Pathways Program reflects state policymakers' commitment to ensuring that every student graduates with both academic preparation and career readiness, as evidenced by districts like Fresno where career and technical education enrollment has soared and graduation rates for pathway students reach 98%. These investments have enabled districts to transcend the college-or-career dichotomy, creating integrated pathways where students graduate with industry certifications, college credits, and university eligibility.

Implementation Barriers: In all six school systems, Linked Learning and career pathways are among the most effective drivers of student engagement and success. But these opportunities are unequally distributed across California, underfunded, and inconsistently implemented. Also, despite the intent of the Linked Learning model, core academics are often disconnected from applied learning opportunities, leaving students unmotivated by traditional coursework.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Establish a statewide Linked Learning support network** to ensure every student has access to high-quality, academics-linked, college-compatible career pathway courses before high school graduation.
- » **Expand funding for regional career hubs** that allow smaller districts to collaborate with industry and higher education partners.
- » **Make dual enrollment a universally available opportunity** by removing structural and cultural barriers and incentivizing partnerships between K-12 schools, community colleges, and 4-year universities.
- » **Ensure that experiential learning—such as internships, civic engagement, and community-based projects—can count for credit** and be embedded into dual enrollment and pathway programs across the state.

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.

Current Progress: California leaders have institutionalized the state's commitment to supporting the whole child through the Community Schools Partnership Program, which has allowed districts to transform schools into true community hubs, as seen in Shasta County's Community Connect initiative that seamlessly integrates mental health, housing, and family support services.

Implementation Barriers: While several California districts have built strong school-based mental health systems, access to high-quality embedded services remains uneven. Also, chronic absenteeism, disengagement, and mental health difficulties are mounting statewide among youth, and no statewide plan exists to ensure equitable mental health services on campuses.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Support every public high school to have a dedicated mental health team**, including counselors, social workers, and trauma-informed specialists. For small schools and districts, the mental health team could be shared.
- » **Provide long-term, sustainable funding for mental health services through the Local Control Funding Formula** rather than one-time grants.

- » **Expand and strengthen community schools as hubs** that integrate services for mental health, student engagement, and family support into all high-need high schools.

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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.

Current Progress: California policymakers' leadership in enacting the Local Control Funding Formula fundamentally transformed how schools are funded and measured, moving from punitive test-based accountability to locally-driven systems that allow districts like Lindsay and Anaheim to focus on authentic student learning.

Implementation Barriers: Standardized testing remains a dominant but incomplete measure of success that fails to capture student engagement, career readiness, or deeper learning. Districts are generally held accountable through compliance-driven metrics, rather than authentic measures of student growth. In addition, conventional state assessments are limited in their ability to fully capture the progress California schools have shown through investments in community schools and other related efforts.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Redefine college and career readiness indicators to focus on authentic academic and work-related success**, rather than just test performance. Include student portfolios of work, performance-based assessments, and real-world projects that better gauge how prepared students are for the 21st century workforce.
- » **Use graduate follow-up data to track long-term student success** in college, careers, and civic life.
- » **Support districts to pilot and scale performance-based assessments**—such as portfolios, capstones, and exhibitions—that align with redefined graduate outcomes.
- » **Explore pathways for recognition and validation of student competencies** (e.g., Career Passports or mastery transcripts) that can be shared with employers and higher education institutions.

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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.

Current Progress: California state leadership's strategic investments in the recent \$10 million Secondary School Redesign Pilot Program signals ongoing commitment to scaling effective innovations, enabling districts like those featured in this report to become laboratories of innovation and allowing their transformative practices to serve as models for statewide implementation.

Implementation Barriers: Some California districts and counties have developed highly effective models for enhancing adolescent learning and well-being, but there is no systematic way to identify, spread, and scale these innovations statewide.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Create a statewide innovation fund for adolescent learning and well-being**, with dedicated, multi-year funding and priority given to districts serving low-income students and students of color.
- » **Develop an innovation and learning hub for school systems** to share promising models, strategies, and tools.
- » **Establish a school innovation pilot process** to allow districts to test new models of assessment, scheduling, graduation requirements, or instructional design without being penalized under outdated regulations. Use this process to generate proof points, share learnings, and identify opportunities for regulatory change.
- » **Enact a “stability clause” for education policy** that protects districts from abrupt shifts in state priorities, allowing sustained execution of long-term initiatives.
- » **Establish “systemness innovation grants”** that support local educational agencies in co-developing shared strategies and professional learning models that help them work together.

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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. Higher education—in partnership with K-12—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.

Current Progress: California’s statewide investments in high school redesign through the California Community Schools Partnership Program, the Golden State Pathways Program, and the Dual Enrollment Opportunities Competitive Grant Program have created a strong foundation for reimagining high school experiences—and their alignment with postsecondary pathways.

Implementation Barriers: Despite these investments, high school redesign efforts risk falling short if higher education institutions continue to rely on traditional admissions criteria. California is well positioned to support efforts to align K-12 graduation outcomes with postsecondary expectations, working with colleges and universities to recognize and reward new demonstrations of student learning—such as performance assessments, capstone projects, and mastery-based transcripts—that better reflect 21st century readiness.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Convene a cross-sector advisory group of K-12, higher education, and workforce leaders** to align expectations for student competencies and graduate profiles.
- » Partner with higher education institutions to **pilot admissions practices that accept portfolios, mastery transcripts, or performance-based demonstrations of learning**.
- » Encourage and work with California State University and University of California systems to **expand definitions of college eligibility to recognize pathway completions, dual enrollment achievements, and real-world learning artifacts**.
- » **Develop a shared communications strategy** to signal to families, educators, and employers that deeper learning, creativity, and purpose—not just GPA and standardized tests—are valued and recognized across California’s education continuum.