

Anaheim Union High School District

From average to aligned: Anaheim's innovation bridges high school and college readiness



Source: Anaheim Union High School District

At first blush, Anaheim High School seems like nothing out of the ordinary. The 2,700-student campus is a sprawling concrete jungle with a modular layout and six-period schedule. Observing classrooms and talking with educators and students makes it clear what differentiates this and other campuses in California's Anaheim Union High School District (Anaheim Union): a spirit of innovation and experimentation, a high level of trust among students and faculty, and a sense of shared purpose. That purpose is anchored in clear values and practices focused on the learning and well-being of students.

The transformation of this Southern California school district didn't happen overnight. In fact, its origins date back to 2014, and progress has been greatly accelerated by landmark state funding and innovative investments made through the Golden State Pathways Program, California Community Schools Partnership Program, and the Dual Enrollment Opportunities Competitive Grant Program.

The qualities that set this school system apart are on full display in a biotechnology class at Anaheim High where the room hums with activity. The students work in groups of two and three. They stand at lab tables, examine cheek swab cultures through microscopes, and take notes. The applied and collaborative nature of the learning on this day are indicative of how the course is structured as a whole. One student later tells us he loves his biotech courses because they are hands-on and it's okay to make mistakes. "You learn from [mistakes] and you know next time to be more careful or be more gentle with the micro-pipetting or the microscope," he says.

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—Anaheim student

This brief is based on case studies featured in Fine, S.M., Rincón-Gallardo, S., Fullan, M. (2026) *Whole Learners, Whole Systems*.

“They know what to do, and they know to ask each other if they get stuck,” says the course’s teacher and pathway lead, as she explains how the course fits into the broader school and system. All of the district’s high schools offer career and technical education (CTE) courses, but each campus has one “exclusive” pathway tied to an emerging high-wage, high-skill field such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, or entrepreneurship. At Anaheim High, the exclusive pathway is biotechnology. Students in the pathway move around the school as a cohort for part of each day. They take linked learning courses like “biotech chemistry” along with general classes and electives. As upperclassmen, they complete summer internships and take dual enrollment courses at a local community college that often lead to certification as a biotech lab assistant.

The sense of purpose and possibility in the biotech course is a feature, not a bug, of the district. Anaheim Union retains many traditional elements of secondary schooling, such as school size and layout, six-period bell schedules, and A–F grading. But these coexist with a significant and palpable shift in priorities, practices, and culture. That shift is rooted in a vision that braids together time-tested goals such as college and career readiness with 21st century skills, whole child supports, and asset-based approaches—and a willingness to reject conventional success metrics in favor of developing new ones.

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To be clear, the strengths that set Anaheim Union apart are emergent and in process. But the district has made headway in sewing the pieces together coherently, balancing steadiness with continual innovation.

Graduation rate gains fueled by Linked Learning pathways and shared vision in Anaheim

Located thirty miles south of downtown Los Angeles, Anaheim is a household name for many Americans—thanks to Disneyland. The theme park’s global reputation and massive revenue stand in sharp contrast with the modest working- and middle-class lives of the city’s residents, a majority of whom

District Profile

Enrollment: Approximately 27,200 students

Student demographics:

- 22% English language learners
- 14% students with disabilities
- 79% low socioeconomic status
- 92% students of color

Location: Orange County

Community: Primarily urban/suburban

College and career readiness score: 49%

Graduation rate: 93%

Chronic absenteeism rate: 23%

SOURCE: [CA DASHBOARD](#)

identify as Hispanic or Latino.

Today, the district is seen as an emerging leader in transforming secondary education. It has a graduation rate of 93%, an A–G completion rate of 54%, and a CTE pathway completion rate of 35%, double the state average in California.

The district was not always a rising star. Superintendent Michael Matsuda, who has worked in the district for more than two decades, described Anaheim Union as unremarkably “average.” During the early years of the federal No Child Left Behind Act era, teachers and leaders focused most of their energy trying, unsuccessfully, to teach to the test. “We spent so much time just making tests and then testing kids, and we were never even good at it,” said Michael Switzer, an Anaheim Union alum who has worked in the district for 18 years. “Teachers weren’t happy. Students weren’t happy. Parents weren’t happy.”

A thorny hallmark of K–12 education is that ideas for promising change rarely spread beyond the walls of a specific classroom, department, or school. In Anaheim Union, the momentum to focus on 21st-century skills rather than on standardized tests began on one campus—Savanna High School—and was supported to spread to other schools by the district office. A key factor was the 2014 appointment of Matsuda as superintendent. With a deep knowledge of the

community, a strategic mindset, and an unflagging enthusiasm for innovation, he fanned the flame that first kindled at Savanna. But Matsuda did not start with top-down mandates. Instead, he encouraged schools to engage in a similar re-visioning process. Matsuda also invited early adopters to share their work in presentations to principals, instructional leaders, and other educators. Eventually, the district built out a vision to reinvent its educational approach, including articulating core beliefs to guide the work.

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—Michael Switzer, Anaheim Union staff, alum, and former teacher

Building coherence through student-centered innovation: Anaheim aligns vision across schools and stakeholders

One consistent point emphasized by Anaheim Union teachers is that they feel empowered and encouraged to abandon traditional practices like striving for wide content coverage. One teacher said he and his colleagues constantly hear the refrain, “I don’t care if you finish the book!” Another common remark is that “more is NOT more.” This view is consistent with the district’s decision to deprioritize state assessments. Anaheim Union halted benchmark tests, “data days” focused on examining test scores, working with pacing guides, and other such practices.

“The tests are not our driver,” Matsuda said. He told school leaders the “game” was to ensure students continued to score well enough on standardized tests that the district did not become a target for state intervention. But building buy-in even from educators is not easy. As one instructional leader at Anaheim High School put it: “Our biggest challenge right now is how do we get teachers to feel comfortable with moving away from this idea that you will have a quiz

every Friday, you will have a test every three weeks, you will turn your homework in on time, you have one chance to get it right.”

Matsuda and his team are strategic about messaging to parents and the community. Politically, Anaheim has a roughly even mix of conservative and liberal voters. Matsuda tends to talk about Anaheim Union’s new direction as less about racial equity and reinvigorating American democracy—goals which conservative stakeholders might read as too progressive—than about career training for 21st-century workplaces. “It’s very hard to argue with jobs,” he says.

A second strategy is being transparent about the changes. For example, all schools host regular “parent learning walks” that involve observing classrooms. Anaheim Union also organizes regular events where students share their learning and accomplishments with the public. Each fall, the district produces a college and career fair at the Anaheim Convention Center. Students exhibit their work and answer questions from peers, parents, and community members.

The district’s insistence that its values are delivered in the context of instruction has shaped its approach to “community schooling.” As a recipient of California Community Schools Partnership Program funds, the district has expanded school-based wraparound services and community partnerships. Uniquely, AUHSD has also used the grant to fund a “community schools teacher” at each designated campus. These educators remain in the classroom part-time to pilot new practices related to a community-based approach. With their release time, they support peers in doing the same.

Anaheim’s ‘Vacant to Vibrant’ project illustrates innovation and peer-led learning culture

At Loara High School, collaboration supported by a community schools teacher led to a project that brought greater student and community voice into curriculum design. Valencia Davis—a 25-year social science teacher who now serves as the Community Schools Teacher at Loara High School—works with teachers to identify patterns from the district’s “assets and needs” survey, from the student voice circles that she helps organize and from parent and community meetings. The goal? Use this “street data” to shape what happens in classrooms. An example



Source: Anaheim Union High School District

outcome of this community work is the “Vacant to Vibrant” project, which involved planning and developing a community garden where three vacant lots used to stand. Students designed the garden space. Science students conduct soil testing to inform irrigation plans, while world language students examine native plants and native culture. The project is an example of how all pieces of the Anaheim Union vision come together: 21st-century skills, student voice, community engagement, cross-curricular collaboration and asset-based teaching (a concept that sees student diversity and individual student strengths as valued resources to inform instruction).

Looking ahead, a key question is how Anaheim Union can continue to develop new metrics that tell the story of student learning and development, garner

support from policymakers, and convince other systems to follow suit. District leaders are keenly aware of this challenge. There is reason to believe Anaheim Union is positioned to lead the way, while ensuring the steady work of improving instruction and transforming the adolescent experience in classrooms.

The Executive Summary, Policy Brief, and other district case studies can be found at <https://michaelfullan.ca/articles/>.

Key Takeaways

- » The shifts at Anaheim Union are rooted in a unified vision that coherently weaves together multiple goals. Those include preparing students for both college and careers, cultivating 21st century skills, developing new instructional models, and designing approaches that tap into young people’s strengths while supporting all of their needs, not just academic ones.
- » Educators, students, and families strongly support the changes.
- » The effort began with a single school, rather than a system-wide or centrally-led process. It involved community engagement from the start, a handful of innovative educators, and a steady process of sharing insights among faculty that was accelerated by thoughtful district-level encouragement and support.
- » State support via the Golden State Pathways, California Community Schools Partnership, and Dual Enrollment Opportunities Competitive Grant Programs have proven vital to help fuel the district’s innovation.