

Lindsay Unified School District

How a Struggling Central Valley District Became a National Leader Through Competency-Based Systems



The story of Lindsay Unified School District is one of spectacular turnaround achieved through a steady focus on building competency-based systems. But what's also striking is how Lindsay's young people, especially its high schoolers, engage with adults.

During a student-led tour at Lindsay High School, students describe positive relationships with teachers and administrators, the school's enticing array of career and technical education (CTE) pathways, and their dreams for the future. The tour begins in the engineering building. The guides—two upperclassmen at Lindsay High School's engineering academy—show where they work on design challenges. Recently, they have been trying to build and code a machine that can sort marbles by color. They are effusive about their hands-on engineering classes, rich with opportunities to design, build, and experiment with concepts and skills introduced during whole-group instruction.

The CTE pathways courses are a big draw—definitely

the most fun, the students say—but the nature of the district's competency-based instructional system makes the classes feel challenging but manageable, they report. Even in core subjects, the students can (within limits) set their own pace, seeking out extra support while forging ahead in areas where they excel. "Learning in this school is mainly in our hands," one student says.

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—Student

For more than two hours during the tour, students are the main source of information about the district's vision, values, and practices. This orientation toward young people is the beating heart of the systems that make the district unique. Though Lindsay Unified built its competency-based foundation years before California's major education investments, recent state funding—particularly through the California

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

Community Schools Partnership Program—has allowed the district to accelerate its transformation by expanding mental health supports, family services, and community partnerships that complement its academic innovations.

Lindsay Unified's competency-based system redefines readiness and elevates student agency

Lindsay is an unexpected place to find a thriving and innovative school system. Located in the far eastern portion of California's Central Valley, the tiny town is isolated and heavily agricultural, with few jobs outside of agriculture and municipal work. The closest 4-year university is more than an hour's drive away. Lindsay's schools were once considered the worst in the region, with low achievement, high teacher turnover, and heavy gang activity. In 2006, the district convened key stakeholders to create a new plan for the future. What emerged was a deceptively simple vision: Students should feel safe, cared for, and supported to succeed in college, the workforce, and adult life.

As an early signal of transformation, district leaders changed the language used to describe the system's core components. Students became "learners," for example, and teachers became "learning facilitators." But the far more complex task was reorganizing instruction so students could learn at their own pace. The district invested in a custom-built Learning Management System that allowed teachers to build and revise curriculum modules with tasks, assessments, and rubrics. The goal was to create a "transparent" curriculum that allowed students to move at their own pace, learn "anywhere, anytime," and have numerous opportunities to demonstrate proficiency.

Lindsay Unified moved to a K-8 model without middle schools, making it easier for teachers to align their curricula. The district also eliminated grade levels. Although educators opted to keep students in age-alike groupings, the new system meant that students in the same class might be working on dramatically different content and skills.

Some things stayed the same. Students still took state standardized tests and schools retained a traditional bell schedule. Classes remained organized around traditional subjects and teachers continued to plan backwards from state standards. What changed was how and when students could access learning tasks, rather than the nature of those tasks.

District Profile

Enrollment: Approximately 3,900 students

Student demographics:

- 33% English language learners
- 10% students with disabilities
- 89% low socioeconomic status
- 97% students of color

Location: Tulare County

Community: Rural

College and career readiness score: 52%

Graduation rate: 94%

Chronic absenteeism rate: 12%

SOURCE: [CA DASHBOARD](#)

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The early years of transformation were not easy. Staff turnover was high, as the district learned how to support educators as they went through a period of "unlearning." One longtime English teacher says: "I knew how to teach the material one way, but in a competency-based system I could no longer say, 'Well I taught it. You didn't learn it. Sorry, we're moving on.'"

Over time, Lindsay educators became more skillful at competency-based teaching. And students were energized, engaged, and far more persistent when they encountered obstacles. Chronic absenteeism dropped, school culture improved, test scores rose and staff turnover slowed.



Twenty years of coherence: How Lindsay Unified built districtwide alignment around a shared vision

Lindsay Unified now has a stable group of leaders who work in deep and sustained ways on one set of goals, rather than changing course. The district’s strategic design has remained virtually unchanged for nearly 20 years. One key element of the transformation was to foster *systemness*—a sense on the part of all district stakeholders that they can act on and transform the system. Lindsay Unified leaders also emphasize *symmetry*—the idea that adult learners need reciprocal experiences to those of younger learners. So, for example, educators who struggle to meet expectations receive support, not punishment. The pairing of a clear vision with steadiness, systemness, and symmetry has paid dividends, with much higher graduation and college-going rates, strong ratings for school climate, and little staff turnover.

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Federal and state funds have helped to support and expand programs run by the district’s Student and Family Services department, including a resource

center that serves as a one-stop shop for families who need clothing, food, medical care, or other assistance.

A striking feature of Lindsay Unified is the consistent view—from district administrators, school leaders, teachers, and even students—of what’s needed to take the school system to the next level: time, space, and support to explore more imaginative and radical models of instruction and assessment. Project-based learning came up repeatedly. At Lincoln K-8, administrators said they see renewed interest in pushing the envelope with authentic, interdisciplinary work.

At Lindsay High School, a music teacher described the energy and engagement of an experimental, cross-curricular project. “We had four to five different departments working together. And the kids have all said that is the most meaningful project that they’ve done.”

Lindsay Unified shows how California can unlock potential by pairing stable funding with flexibility on traditional assessment metrics

Lindsay Unified’s maturity and stability as a system, paired with the culture of collaboration, puts it in a strong position to innovate. But state policies and conventional metrics constrain this potential.

That tension provides a window into the complex crosswinds that characterize California’s secondary



education landscape. During the heyday of test-based accountability, Lindsay Unified decided on a radical new way of doing school. This big bet created a stable and steady system that accommodates important state-supported additions, such as the expansion of CTE pathways, the development of an in-house educator preparation program, the shift from Advanced Placement to dual enrollment, and a deepened emphasis on wellness and community engagement. Now, the district is ready to rethink the one thing that it initially left unchanged: the organization of learning goals into traditional subject areas and the assessment of these goals via conventional measures.

With help from the state of California—including both crucial, ongoing funding and further steps to cultivate an innovation-friendly policy environment—Lindsay Unified has the potential to take its innovative practices to a new level. This opportunity would not simply be good news for local residents; it could provide inspiration and even a roadmap for other systems to pursue.

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



Source: Lindsay Unified School District

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Key Takeaways

- » Lindsay Unified's impressive turnaround began with stakeholders crafting a shared vision of student outcomes (all learners will feel safe, cared for, and prepared for the future), a process goal (all learners get what they need when they need it), and a method for achieving it (competency-based systems of instruction).
- » The district's "big bet" involves transforming how and when students access learning tasks and assessments.
- » Lindsay Unified has seen a dramatic transformation in student outcomes and is an exemplar for competency-based education. Key to its progress is steadiness, systemness, and symmetry.
- » Students generally feel a sense of agency over their learning. They appreciate the flexibility to learn at their own pace and the culture of trust and supportiveness.
- » State, federal, and private grants have been essential to fulfill a vision for expanded CTE pathways, develop a teacher residency program, shift from Advanced Placement to dual enrollment courses, and deepen the district's emphasis on wellness and community engagement.
- » Staff and students are increasingly eager to explore project-based learning and other less traditional approaches to curriculum and assessment. But despite some innovation, they still feel hamstrung by statewide assessments and the limited measures available on state performance dashboards.