

Oakland Unified School District

Integrating Real-World Learning, Rigorous Academics, and a Sense of Joy and Purpose Supports Student Engagement and Outcomes



To hear seniors in the Oakland Unified School District share what they're taking away from their high school experience is inspiring. "My heart has grown." "I know I can serve my community in important ways, and I will." "I am prepared to undertake the challenging work of my next stage as a university student." "I am hopeful and optimistic about the future."

It's easy to understand students' sense of enthusiasm and confidence, given the nature of the experiences they have and the work they undertake regularly as high school students.

At Fremont High School, for example, 10th graders in the Construction and Architecture pathway build furniture for an outdoor playground at a nearby elementary school. One student shares in Spanish—his first language—that it makes him smile to picture younger children using this furniture when learning outdoors. Meanwhile, students in the Environmental Health and Public Health Academies work in small groups to identify issues of concern on campus

related to those domains, reviewing relevant documentation and interviewing students, teachers, and staff. (To learn more about this school, check out the Learning Policy Institute's brief on Fremont High School.)

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—Oakland Unified Senior

Oakland Unified is building an education system that is deeply connected to the world around students, where learning is meaningful, purposeful, and transformative. Through Linked Learning pathways, community partnerships, and a commitment to whole-child development, the district is creating a high school experience that integrates rigorous academics with real-world application. The district's transformation demonstrates the power of aligning

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

state policy investments with local innovation: State community schools funding has enhanced the district's comprehensive student support systems, while a voter-approved parcel tax ensures the long-term sustainability of Linked Learning—providing a model for how coordinated funding streams can sustain educational transformation at scale.

The district's strategy is anchored in teacher collaboration, school-based coaching, and a tightly woven support network that ensures every student has access to caring adults and tailored guidance. This vision—rooted in joy, equity, and student agency—has enabled Oakland Unified to develop a sustainable, deeply engaging model of high school education.

Oakland Unified students engage in joyful learning and community-connected capstone projects on their way to postsecondary success

Oakland Unified is a racially and ethnically diverse K-12 district with 17 high schools—a mix of traditional and public charter schools. Its strategic vision centers on creating a full-service community school district that delivers high academic achievement and addresses the needs of the “whole child.” With a core belief in eliminating systemic inequities, the system integrates academic, social, and emotional learning into its programs.

At the heart of the district's strategy for high school are Linked Learning pathways, which combine rigorous academics, career-based learning, and real-world experiences. The system's robust partnerships with local organizations, community colleges, and the City of Oakland enhance this approach. The strategy is oriented by a vision of linked learning where every young person has multiple opportunities to connect with their community, curriculum, school, teachers,



Source: Oakland Unified School District

District Profile

Enrollment: Approximately 33,900 students

Student demographics:

- 33% English language learners
- 16% students with disabilities
- 81% low socioeconomic status
- 89% students of color

Location: Oakland

Community: Urban

College and career readiness score: 43%

Graduation rate: 81%

Chronic absenteeism rate: 31%

SOURCE: [CA DASHBOARD](#)

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and peers, as well as their purpose and vocation. This vision has helped the district access state, federal, and foundation funding to serve this approach.

Cultivating joy is a remarkable aspect of Oakland's goals for the student experience. Joy itself is named as a strategic priority, and it is easily detectable in the city's high schools. It's common to see young people, teachers, school and district leaders smiling and laughing and, the next minute, calm and concentrated. Each high school creates multiple opportunities to foster joy through myriad clubs, student-led activities and celebrations, overnight camps, sports, and more.

Oakland Unified also has helped its high schools develop assessment practices that capture student growth and development. Capstone projects are a hallmark and a prominent assessment practice for students to give public accounts of their learning, growth, and college or career readiness. These

individual research and development projects challenge seniors to identify real-world problems; to design, propose, and test solutions; and present their findings.

The vision Oakland Unified has developed for student learning and well-being, as well as the pedagogies and learning environments that bring these to life, stand in contrast with conventional approaches in California. The district has deprioritized Advanced Placement coursework, for example, which lowers its state College and Career Readiness score. This bold move is grounded in a clear vision of the powerful learning experiences the district seeks, which can be more authentically measured through capstone projects, student portfolios, and community products that students develop.

The district emphasizes equipping students with the knowledge and resources for postsecondary success. School counselors, pathway coaches, and career and technical education (CTE) staff work closely with students to support them. Counselors play an active role in guiding students through college applications and financial aid opportunities, ensuring that all students—particularly first-generation college applicants—receive individualized support. Dedicated career counselors and pathway coordinators organize internship placements, connect students with local employers, and facilitate industry mentorship programs.

Linked Learning pathways connect purpose, hands-on learning, and core academics

What's remarkable about the hands-on, problem- and project-based learning experiences is that they are not simply an add-on to the Oakland learning experience. Instead, they are core to the enterprise, intentionally designed to organize the student experience. Students in the wood shop, for instance, are not simply building outdoor furniture but using this project as an entry point to deepen and expand their learning of geometry, written expression, and the social sciences.

Two main vehicles through which Oakland Unified brings Linked Learning to life are teacher collaboration and on-site coaching of educators. Every high school organizes its schedule to allocate time for such activities. Regardless of how that collaboration is structured, the practice is designed to support student learning and well-being. Each

school has both a pathways coach and a CTE coach who support teachers in implementing Linked Learning. “Our job isn’t just to teach content. It’s to help students see the purpose in their learning—to connect their passions to real opportunities. That’s when we see them fully engage,” said a pathways coach at Fremont High School.

District administrators concede that the full integration of hands-on learning with the academic core is a work in progress. Some students carry out their research and problem-solving at a basic or superficial level. Yet the clarity of focus that the district has developed for Linked Learning is worth learning from.

Oakland Unified was one of the first California districts to try Linked Learning in high school more than a dozen years ago, when it joined a pilot project. While most participating districts let it wane or simply made it one more offering for students, Oakland went all in, sticking with it as the organizing principle and guiding framework to shape the high school experience.

A key component of Linked Learning is establishing partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, public agencies, and local colleges and universities. The district and school coaches constantly seek out partnerships that allow students to gain direct exposure to local professions through site visits, seminars and conversations with experts, or internships.

When the Linked Learning pilot started to take hold, student absenteeism and dropout rates declined sharply, while student engagement and achievement grew, particularly among African American students. To sustain this progress, the city proposed and approved a parcel tax allocating additional funding for Linked Learning through 2037. The steady flow of funding enables the district to provide consistent support for pathway programs, professional development, and essential resources.

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—Fremont High pathways coach

Oakland Unified weaves student care and community service into pathways

The high schools visited are organized in Linked Learning pathways or academies. Students select and join a pathway and, for the most part, remain in the cohort from grades 10 to 12. Within each pathway is a structure of student support. The redesign of Oakland high schools ensures that every student has a core peer community and one or more adults to check in on them, make referrals to support services as needed, and bring up issues of concern to other teachers and the school administration. With structures like these, even large comprehensive high schools manage to create a small-school feel.

The community schools model in Oakland gives concrete expression to a culture of care evident everywhere you look—in hugs, handshakes, and shoulder pats between and among adults and young people, and in the intentional design of student cohorts linked to adults who check in on students.



Over time, the California Community Schools Partnership Program has brought in new resources to deepen and grow the community schools work. The state grant has provided larger and better equipped wellness centers and community school managers in each school that connect students to medical, mental health, and family engagement resources.

A key aspect of Oakland's school-community partnerships is that they don't simply support students; they help communities. Community service has historically been an important feature of many Oakland Unified partnerships, reflecting the district's deep links with the social movements that shaped the life and history of the city. At Fremont High School, for example, community service is now embedded in all of the school's academies. Students there helped to develop public service announcements for a local civil rights organization and build an elementary school playground.

Stepping back, Oakland has made remarkable progress in bringing Linked Learning to life in powerful ways. But the quality and depth of learning varies widely from classroom to classroom and from school to school. It's critical to probe this, to take stock of the most powerful examples of authentic learning, to identify their key attributes and the conditions and strategies that make them possible, and strategize to make these available across all high schools in the district.

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

Key Takeaways

- » Oakland Unified has a strong vision for Linked Learning that organizes and gives coherence to the district's work. The system has harnessed this vision to attract funding and channel resources to fit its approach, rather than fueling separate, siloed projects.
- » Joy is a strategic priority evident in the interactions between and among young people and adults, from the classroom to the district office.
- » Oakland Unified strategically identifies and pursues grants and other resources that deepen and expand existing efforts rather than always starting something new.
- » Linked Learning and community schools have been integral to the district strategy for more than a decade. The impact of this steady work is evident in the everyday experiences of high schoolers.
- » Key elements of the strategy for adolescent learning and well-being include a clear, shared vision of learning and pedagogy; time for teacher collaboration; school-based coaching; and partnerships with local organizations, agencies, and community colleges.