

Fresno Unified School District

Building a Career Technical Education Ecosystem that Transforms Traditional Engagement and Graduation Rates



Source: Tony Bernard, Fresno Unified School District

Across the city of Fresno, high schoolers enrolled in the local district's thriving career and technical education (CTE) pathways regularly engage in purposeful work.

At McLane High School, a large comprehensive campus, sophomores in the Art Ventures pathway are editing yearbook portraits. They sit at desktop computers consulting quietly with each other as they work with deep focus. These students are in the second year of a 4-year sequence of courses offered via the Art Ventures Academy—one of the school's four CTE pathways. As juniors, they will advance from graphic design and photography to videography, which means they will produce "Highlander Highlights," the school's weekly news and announcements video.

Building on work that began more than a decade ago, Fresno Unified School District's pathways initiatives have been strengthened by crucial state investments, including funding from the Golden State Pathways Program, the College and Careers Access Program,

and the California Community Schools Partnership Program.

Some McLane High students will get involved in live-casting school sports games, ESPN-style. Others will work with community groups to produce public service announcements on topics such as how homelessness affects local families. As seniors, they will develop interdisciplinary projects, turning their English essays into multimedia pieces to share at a local arts festival. Many of them later will pursue 4-year degrees, benefiting from their skills in communication, collaboration, creativity, and storytelling.

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

A mile north, at Duncan Polytechnical High School, juniors in the Heavy Truck pathway study for a test. They hunch over their books—a postsecondary-level automotive textbook—and glance back at the tri-fold displays they have created to showcase the big ideas on which they will be assessed. The classroom’s glass windows look out into another learning space: an enormous indoor garage that holds several heavy-duty trucks, including electrics. The upperclassmen spend all afternoon in pathway courses, with seniors spending two afternoons each week interning at job sites. By graduation, they will have earned enough industry certifications to pursue entry-level jobs. Since their courses are A-G certified, with several carrying dual enrollment credit, they also can pursue higher education opportunities—especially at Fresno State, which guarantees enrollment to all Fresno Unified students who graduate having completed their A-G requirements.

Closer to downtown Fresno, sophomores at the Patino School of Entrepreneurship work on client pitches during a team-taught English and history course. Families are drawn to this campus for its small-school feel, interdisciplinary approach, and single-pathway model.

These examples provide a glimpse into the thriving spaces in Fresno Unified’s CTE ecosystem.

A robust CTE ecosystem supported by state investments helps students transcend challenges

Fresno has long been known for CTE. Over the past decade, it has seen a shift in both the “what” and “for whom” of its programs. Supported by partnerships with local industry and accelerated by recent state investments, Fresno Unified leads the way in reimagining CTE as a place for all students to find purpose in their learning and explore possible futures.

Located in the heart of the Central Valley, Fresno has deep ties to the surrounding region’s large-scale agricultural production. It is the nation’s third-largest majority Latinx city, and also has the nation’s second-largest Hmong population. Fresno’s geographic isolation limits postsecondary opportunities; Fresno State (part of the California State University system) is the only nearby public college.

The district is deeply impacted by poverty, and 1 in 5 students are English learners. Poverty’s effects show up in test scores, which are generally low compared

District Profile

Enrollment: Approximately 68,200 students

Student demographics:

- 21% English language learners
- 14% students with disabilities
- 88% low socioeconomic status
- 93% students of color

Location: Fresno County

Community: Urban

College and career readiness score: 43%

Graduation rate: 86%

Chronic absenteeism rate: 30%

SOURCE: [CA DASHBOARD](#)

to wealthier urban districts closer to the California coast. The district does have some bright spots evident on the state dashboard: Chronic absenteeism has dropped slowly but steadily, the graduation rate is on par with the state average, and the percentage of students who meet California’s “college and career preparedness” benchmark has steadily grown to 43%. Still, the story of Fresno as a “failing” district is hard to escape, given the priority California and the nation place on test scores. Exploring the district’s recent work on CTE pathways and student well-being reveals a more textured and inspiring story.

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Fresno Unified’s innovative approach dissolves the false choice between college and career preparation

In the 1980s, Fresno Unified students had a clear and mutually exclusive choice after high school between college and career-technical tracks, according to Superintendent Misty Her. “When I was a student,” the

question was: 'Do you want to be on the college track or ... the career technical track?' And I was like, 'Well, what if I want to do both?'"

Until about ten years ago, only about 5% of the district's CTE classes were A-G compliant. In 2014, the situation hit an inflection point, when the Fresno business community spoke up. "The community was like, "Enough, you're not offering what we need,"" recalls a district leader. This awakening coincided with the state legislature's decision to implement the Local Control Funding Formula—and with a shift toward measuring indicators of college and career readiness in broader ways than standardized tests could.

Fresno Unified leaders began to realize that the "either/or" nature of college prep and CTE courses was a problem. As its CTE offerings grew, the district created new high-wage, high-skill pathways such as aviation, computer science, and biotechnology. This required reorganizing schedules and spaces at the high schools and working directly with industry partners. District leaders shifted the course of study and syllabi in CTE courses to comply with the state's A-G requirements. Over time, they forged partnerships with higher education to integrate dual enrollment courses into CTE pathways. The goal? Increase the share of students who graduate with the trifecta of industry certifications, A-G completion, and college credits.

A steady commitment to CTE programs paired with robust student supports are core to Fresno Unified's success

Fresno's efforts to expand CTE have required unwavering focus and long-term investments. The district has spent more than a decade building its "CTE ecosystem." It has weathered setbacks, including episodic friction between district leadership and the teachers' union, and, recently, turnover in the superintendency. But the district has stood by CTE, and even accelerated its efforts in recent years via funding from the Golden State Pathways Program and the College and Careers Access Program.

Today, Fresno Unified's CTE programs are thriving. Every high school has such coursework in multiple areas, and enrollment has jumped to 45% of high school students. The graduation rate for students involved with CTE is 98%, internal metrics show, compared with a district-wide rate of 84%. Student



Source: Keith Rybaczyk, Fresno Unified School District

engagement in pathway courses tells the most compelling story. Jeremy Ward, the former principal of Duncan Polytechnical High School and currently the Assistant Superintendent for College and Career Readiness, describes being at the Fresno Fair and seeing students don CTE academy gear. "One kid was wearing his teacher academy hoodie from Roosevelt, and another was wearing his medical assistant shirt," he said. "It's an identity for them. They're really proud of the programs."

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—Assistant Superintendent
Jeremy Ward

Fresno Unified has also invested heavily to address students' social and emotional needs. With some strategic reallocations and the support of various state funding streams, including federal pandemic relief money and the California Community School Partnership Program (CCSPP), annual district expenditures on "whole child supports" have increased from \$5 million to \$50 million. This shift has produced a gradual change in mindset among district and school leaders.

Tioga Middle School is pivoting from reaction to prevention. This approach is apparent in its new Targeted Student Support Team space, a one-stop-shop for students in need of anything from

mental health support to conflict resolution. The space is staffed by a clinical social worker, school psychologist, drug counselor, and a restorative justice counselor.

The ethos of district-supported experimentation within Fresno Unified has allowed networks of leaders to collaborate on thorny problems, including chronic absenteeism. During a meeting of the district's Middle School Attendance Collaborative, administrators from each school presented their most impactful attendance-related changes. The picture that emerged was of creative experimentation in using new CCSPF funds with other existing resources to tackle absenteeism. One middle school group shared insights based on student interviews: Some students skipped school because they were ashamed of not

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having clean clothes; others missed the bus and didn't feel safe walking to school. In response, leaders persuaded the school board to designate funds to buy washers and dryers for one middle school—and, in the future, for all middle schools. They also tapped community schools funds to purchase a van and have a home-school liaison pick up tardy students “with no questions asked.”

As the largest district in this study, Fresno faces the most extreme version of the question of what it might take to imagine and enact a transformed system at scale. Empowering principals and other site leaders to enact “middle out” leadership is a promising strategy, but it still needs to be connected to a broadly shared vision and direction in meaningful ways. One noteworthy challenge is how to balance, and even integrate, these two approaches.

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



Source: Tony Bernard, Fresno Unified School District

Key Takeaways

- » Fresno Unified has made remarkable headway in rethinking and expanding CTE pathways that provide opportunities for deep and purposeful learning. This progress was achieved through steady, sustained work.
- » The district has gradually developed a CTE ecosystem that reimagines industry-specific career readiness as a “both/and” with college preparedness.
- » With vital state support, Fresno Unified has invested heavily in adolescent mental health and well-being and other whole child supports to improve school culture and academic learning.
- » District leaders use the tools of continuous improvement to tackle problems like chronic absenteeism, resulting in creative and effective new uses of community school funds.
- » Integrating site-level autonomy with system-wide scaling remains an area for growth, as does ensuring the learner-centered shifts apparent in CTE pathways are also reaching the academic core in Fresno secondary schools.