

Principal: Linked learning has value in diverse school

"High school is not working for large numbers of our young people," given that only one-third of high school graduates are assessed as college- and career-ready, according to Brad Stam, vice president and chief operating officer of [ConnectEd, The California Center for College and Career](#). "We need to change things in a pretty fundamental way," especially since "students are mentally dropping out" in school, as well as physically dropping out without finishing, he added.

Students need curricula they can relate to their postsecondary lives, in turn increasing engagement and persistence, Stam said during a recent [Alliance for Excellent Education](#) webinar on how California uses linked learning in implementing college- and career-ready standards.

Linked learning prepares students for both college and career, using a college-preparatory curriculum combined with technology-based education through problem- or project-based learning. It also can include social and emotional supports and work-based learning. Several California schools adopted linked-learning pathways with 250 to 400 students, developed by considering what students should be able to do at graduation, and then mapped backward to the ninth grade.

Students learn in cohorts in settings that can extend beyond the school day and beyond the classroom, and they can earn dual credit. According to Stam, California pathways students earn more credits and have higher rates of school attendance and college enrollment than students not in linked learning programs. Linked learning also provides "a great 'how' for the 'what' of the Common Core," Stam said. He added that there is no need for educators to choose between linked learning or the [Common Core State Standards](#).

The CCSS emphasize literacy through analysis of complex texts, and linked-learning pathways use materials such as requests for proposals, budget analyses, reports, trade journals, and patient-care narratives for this purpose, Stam said. He added that students find these texts "highly interesting" and also provide students with valuable context for evidence-based writing.

Moreover, materials with increased relevance and engagement contribute to student persistence in school. Skills not addressed by the CCSS that students learn in pathways include collaboration, task management, and persistence. There is "a powerful pull exerted by the Common Core," while linked learning "brings real-world authenticity" to the curriculum, Stam said.

Meeting community needs

One California school has found that linked learning has served them well as their community has changed. At [Antioch High School](#) the curriculum "just wasn't working for our students as we became more diverse," said Principal Louie Rocha.

Rocha grew up in the school district when the community "was kind of like Mayberry," he said. It transitioned from rural to suburban, and now is a diverse city of over 100,000 people. The child poverty rate of 70 percent has "climbed significantly," according Rocha.

In SY 2010-11, Antioch developed its first academy, which concentrates on engineering. That year, the school applied for [U.S. Department of Education](#) small learning community grants. The school now has three additional academies, dedicated to biomedicine, media technology, and leadership and public service. Teachers signed up for learning communities, and teachers and students were moved to common learning areas. The district passed a bond issue that enabled school redesign to accommodate this.

Four lead teachers and four vice principals were selected for each team. The four academies' teachers have 50 minutes per day for collaborative planning. ConnectEd trainers worked with the school staff. Now teachers set their own meetings with agendas and report to the principal. The academies are "a great way" to foster educator autonomy and creativity, Rocha said.

Disciplinary actions have reduced by 50 percent, and attendance has increased, according to Rocha. Academy students have better scores on the high school exit examination than non-academy students. Rocha asserted that the difference is that teachers are taking more ownership and students are more engaged. Students can change their pathway, but students "rarely" want to do so, Rocha said.

According to Stam, nine LEAs have sustained their commitment to linked learning through during leadership changes. He added, "Linked learning is an equity strategy. . . . If we say [it is] for all students, we mean all students."

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