

A NEW VISION FOR ADOLESCENT LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

Based on research by Sarah Fine, Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, and Michael Fullan



This set of briefs was based on a study of six education systems in California conducted by Sarah Fine, Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, and Michael Fullan, published in a book from Corwin Press titled *Whole Learners, Whole Systems* (2026). The study involved extensive field research, including classroom observations, artifact analysis, and interviews with a variety of stakeholders. It was undertaken with Institutional Review Board approval from the University of California, San Diego. Funding for this project was provided by the Youth Thriving Through Learning Fund.

The Youth Thriving Through Learning Fund is a collaboration of leading education philanthropists and foundations that aims to transform California's education system to dramatically expand high-impact structures, practices, and pathways for California's adolescents, offering them more meaningful learning experiences and deeper connections to school, work, and civic life. Learn more at stuartfoundation.org/youth-thriving-through-learning.

Cover photo sources: Keith Rybaczyk/Fresno Unified School District, Lindsay Unified School District, Anaheim Union High School District

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A New Vision for Adolescent Learning and Well-Being



Source: Tony Bernard/Fresno Unified School District

California’s strategic investments in 21st century high school redesign—through community schools, dual enrollment, and career pathways programs—are accelerating innovative, student-centered transformation in pockets across the state. Common across all districts studied are four key practices: shared vision, steady work, symmetry, and “systemness”—in other words, these districts are places where goals are created as a community, where improvement happens over the long term, where leaders model core values, and where everyone sees themselves as integral to shaping the system. Demystifying what works across these districts crystallizes the next steps California can take to amplify these practices statewide: coordinating funding systems, committing to authentic assessment of deep learning, and creating structured networks between high-performing and emerging districts to spread innovation to all schools.

The United States high school is failing to serve many young people today, with adolescents experiencing disengagement, lack of purpose, and limited access to meaningful learning opportunities. However, a counternarrative is emerging in several California school systems, where system-wide strategies are being implemented to enhance learning and well-being in middle and high schools. In a forthcoming book from Corwin Press titled *Whole Learners, Whole Systems*, Sarah Fine, Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, and Michael Fullan examine the pioneering work of six education systems—Lindsay Unified, Oakland Unified, Fresno Unified, Shasta County Office of Education, Monterey Peninsula Unified, and Anaheim Union

High School District—that leveraged an influx of state funding to drive systemic transformations in secondary education. Collectively, these districts serve a diverse array of students and communities across race, ethnicity, household income, level of educational attainment, and geography (including urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout California).

With strong and sustained support from California statewide leadership, these six school systems are reimagining high school by integrating deep learning and well-being as foundational principles. By aligning instructional practices, support systems, and policy

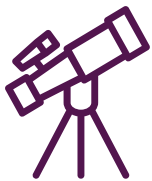
structures, these districts developed innovative approaches that prioritize student agency, career-connected learning, and holistic development. Their work represents a shift away from traditional, test-driven models toward schools that foster purpose and belonging.

The commitment and imagination of educators is at the heart of the transformation happening in these school systems, which in many cases has been the result of steady work over a decade or more. In recent years, progress has been accelerated by the landmark vision and actions from state leaders who dedicated almost

\$5 billion through the \$4.1 billion California Community Schools Partnership Program, the \$200 million Dual Enrollment Opportunities Competitive Grant Program, and the \$500 million Golden State Pathways Program. These dollars provide resources to plan and implement a suite of research-based solutions that California has never before funded in such a concerted way.

Key Elements

The momentum of the school systems featured here is grounded in four key elements that are redefining the role of secondary schools as they enter the second quarter of the 21st century:



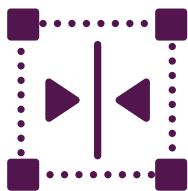
Shared Vision

Each school system established a co-created, compelling, clear, and coherent vision for secondary education. Stakeholder engagement—including educators, students, families, and community members—played a crucial role in defining and sustaining these visions.



Steady Work

Transformation was achieved through long-term commitment rather than short-term initiatives. These districts focused on continuous improvement, refining their approaches over time and resisting the lure of quick-fix solutions.



Symmetry

Leadership at every level modeled the values and practices expected in classrooms and schools, fostering coherence and reinforcing the importance of relational, student-centered education.



Systemness

A culture of collective responsibility and interconnectedness across all levels of the education system were intentionally cultivated, ensuring alignment between classroom practices and district-level strategies. Put simply, all parts pulled in the same direction.

Case Study Highlights

Shasta County Office Of Education

(with 24 districts and 3 small schools operated by the County Office) prioritized a whole child approach through initiatives like Community Connect, which integrates schools with social services to address barriers such as housing and mental health challenges.

Fresno Unified School District

developed a robust career and technical education ecosystem, offering students industry-aligned training and early exposure to career opportunities.

Lindsay Unified School District

implemented a competency-based education system where learning is personalized and students' progress is based on mastery rather than seat time.

Oakland Unified School District

restructured high schools around Linked Learning pathways, providing students with hands-on, real-world learning experiences connected to their personal purpose, their community, and the academic disciplines, while also embedding social-emotional support systems.

Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

combined district-wide support with school-level autonomy, allowing each school to innovate while maintaining a shared focus on student learning and well-being. With flexible, student-driven scheduling, the district empowers learners to tailor their educational experiences while fostering teacher collaboration and professional growth.

Anaheim Union High School District

focused on weaving together diverse educational initiatives into a cohesive system that fosters strong civic mindedness and ensures every student has access to college and career readiness opportunities.



Policy Recommendations

For California to sustain and scale these innovations, state policy must evolve to provide a more coherent and supportive framework. Key recommendations include:

1

Strengthen System Coherence, From Silos to Unified Strategy: California's school districts are building coherent and compelling visions for student success. Now state agencies have the opportunity to align and streamline programs to unlock their full potential.

2

Expand Linked Learning and Career Pathways: Linked Learning and pathways programs are enabling some districts to move beyond a false choice between college and career preparation—all while driving exceptional graduation rates. Now, the state is positioned to build regional career hubs and statewide support networks to ensure all districts can leverage the same transformative opportunities.

3

Invest in Mental Health and Whole Child Supports: Districts are successfully transforming schools into community hubs that integrate mental health and family support services. The state can build on this momentum by ensuring every high school has dedicated mental health teams, creating sustainable funding streams, and expanding community schools funds to all high-need schools.

4

Redefine Readiness Through Competency-Based, Performance-Driven Accountability: California can build on its success in establishing local control of funding and accountability by expanding accountability measures beyond test scores to include student portfolios, real-world projects, and graduate outcomes that better reflect readiness for 21st century careers and college.

5

Create a System for Innovation and Peer Learning: California's innovation islands need bridges to spread successful practices across the state. The state can build bridges by funding and creating systematic channels to share what's already working and minimize policy swings and implementation barriers for districts.

6

Bridge Secondary and Postsecondary Systems, Align College Admissions with 21st Century Readiness: California's high school redesign investments are creating innovative forms of student learning and assessment, but risk being constrained by misaligned college admissions criteria. The state can lead efforts to align K-12 outcomes with postsecondary expectations, ensuring that new demonstrations of learning are recognized and valued across the education continuum.

Conclusion

The pioneering systems featured in this report demonstrate that transformational change in high school is possible. By fostering system-wide coherence, sustaining long-term commitments, and redefining success metrics, California has an opportunity to become a national leader in secondary education reform. Scaling these efforts statewide will require proactive system-building, strategic investment, and a commitment to ensuring that every student has access to a high-quality, purpose-driven education. The evidence shows these approaches need continued support, including dedicated funding, to become the rule rather than the exception. The challenge ahead is not merely to replicate isolated innovations but to build a robust, interconnected system that prioritizes student thriving.

Through continued collaboration, adaptive leadership, and policy alignment, California can lead the way in shaping a new future for secondary education—one that empowers students to learn, grow, and contribute meaningfully to their communities and beyond. These six cases serve as harbingers of this transformation, providing an emerging evidence base for policy action that positions California at the forefront of secondary education innovation nationwide.

**This study was produced through extensive field research that included classroom observations, artifact analysis, and interviews with superintendents, school administrators, principals, classroom teachers, parents, and students. It was undertaken with Institutional Review Board approval from the University of California, San Diego.*



A State Policy Roadmap to Reinvent California High Schools

California’s strategic investments in 21st century high school redesign—through community schools, dual enrollment, and career pathways programs—are showing promising results in pockets across the state. Now, the state is well positioned to build on lessons learned by moving toward coordinated funding systems, committing to authentic assessment of deep learning, and building bridges from “innovation islands” to spread success to all schools in California.

The six school systems featured in a forthcoming book from Corwin Press, authored by Sarah Fine, Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, and Michael Fullan, offer a compelling guide for rethinking high school in California. Strategic investments in student well-being, career pathways, and instructional innovation have generated impressive models that work. If scaled up with continued statewide support, these efforts promise to transform the educational experiences for millions of California adolescents.

But policy conditions in California must continue to evolve to build on recent progress. Below are six key opportunities for state leaders to continue to transform education:

Policy Opportunities

- 1 Strengthen System Coherence: From Silos to Unified Strategy
- 2 Expand Linked Learning and Career Pathways
- 3 Invest in Mental Health and Whole Child Supports
- 4 Redefine Readiness Through Competency-Based, Performance-Driven Accountability
- 5 Create a System for Innovation and Peer Learning
- 6 Bridge Secondary and Postsecondary Systems: Align College Admissions with 21st Century Readiness



Source: Keith Rybaczyk/Fresno Unified School District

1

Strengthen System Coherence: From Silos to Unified Strategy

California’s school districts are building coherent and compelling visions for student success. Now state agencies have the opportunity to align and streamline programs to unlock their full potential.

Current Progress: California state leadership has made remarkable progress and investments in K-12 education through the \$4.1 billion California Community Schools Partnership Program, the \$500 million Golden State Pathways Program, and the \$200 million Dual Enrollment Opportunities Competitive Grant Program. These landmark investments have furthered transformational systems change, as seen in places like Shasta County and Anaheim, which have leveraged the programs to create seamless networks of student and family services.

Implementation Barriers: Despite major investments and progress, policy implementation remains highly fragmented. State-funded initiatives are often administered separately, with little alignment. Districts are overwhelmed by administrative complexity: they deal with multiple, disconnected funding streams that require separate applications, compliance reports, and programmatic oversight.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Create a cross-agency task force to integrate policies** across the California Department of Education, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, California County Superintendents, and county offices of education. In doing so, the state should **establish a unified state framework for adolescent learning and well-being**.
- » **Integrate multiple priorities into a single, coherent framework** encompassing community schools work, expanded learning opportunities, mental health services, career pathways courses, academic improvement efforts, and student engagement strategies.
- » **Amend the state’s Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)** so the focus is less on compliance and more on providing a dynamic tool to help districts align state funding with local priorities. **Reduce bureaucratic burdens by integrating LCAP with other required state plans**, creating a single, streamlined accountability structure.
- » **Expand the capacity of county offices of education to serve as “system connectors” that bridge the gap between state policy and local implementation**, including by providing them with capacity-building grants to help districts integrate state-funded initiatives.
- » **Develop cross-sector partnerships** that include K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and community partners to ensure alignment of goals, language, and learner outcomes across student journeys.
- » **Establish a shared statewide framework for graduate competencies** that reflects the whole learner and guides assessment, instruction, and school design. Districts and schools should be supported in backward-mapping these competencies into graduation requirements, student learning experiences, and performance-based assessments.

2

Expand Linked Learning and Career Pathways

Linked Learning and pathways programs are enabling some districts to move beyond a false choice between college and career preparation—all while driving exceptional graduation rates. Now, the state is positioned to build regional career hubs and statewide support networks to ensure all districts can leverage the same transformative opportunities.

Current Progress: The Golden State Pathways Program reflects state policymakers' commitment to ensuring that every student graduates with both academic preparation and career readiness, as evidenced by districts like Fresno where career and technical education enrollment has soared and graduation rates for pathway students reach 98%. These investments have enabled districts to transcend the college-or-career dichotomy, creating integrated pathways where students graduate with industry certifications, college credits, and university eligibility.

Implementation Barriers: In all six school systems, Linked Learning and career pathways are among the most effective drivers of student engagement and success. But these opportunities are unequally distributed across California, underfunded, and inconsistently implemented. Also, despite the intent of the Linked Learning model, core academics are often disconnected from applied learning opportunities, leaving students unmotivated by traditional coursework.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Establish a statewide Linked Learning support network** to ensure every student has access to high-quality, academics-linked, college-compatible career pathway courses before high school graduation.
- » **Expand funding for regional career hubs** that allow smaller districts to collaborate with industry and higher education partners.
- » **Make dual enrollment a universally available opportunity** by removing structural and cultural barriers and incentivizing partnerships between K-12 schools, community colleges, and 4-year universities.
- » **Ensure that experiential learning—such as internships, civic engagement, and community-based projects—can count for credit** and be embedded into dual enrollment and pathway programs across the state.

3 Invest in Mental Health and Whole Child Supports

Districts are successfully transforming schools into community hubs that integrate mental health and family support services. The state can build on this momentum by ensuring every high school has dedicated mental health teams, creating sustainable funding streams, and expanding community schools funds to all high-need schools.

Current Progress: California leaders have institutionalized the state's commitment to supporting the whole child through the Community Schools Partnership Program, which has allowed districts to transform schools into true community hubs, as seen in Shasta County's Community Connect initiative that seamlessly integrates mental health, housing, and family support services.

Implementation Barriers: While several California districts have built strong school-based mental health systems, access to high-quality embedded services remains uneven. Also, chronic absenteeism, disengagement, and mental health difficulties are mounting statewide among youth, and no statewide plan exists to ensure equitable mental health services on campuses.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Support every public high school to have a dedicated mental health team**, including counselors, social workers, and trauma-informed specialists. For small schools and districts, the mental health team could be shared.
- » **Provide long-term, sustainable funding for mental health services through the Local Control Funding Formula** rather than one-time grants.

- » **Expand and strengthen community schools as hubs** that integrate services for mental health, student engagement, and family support into all high-need high schools.

4 **Redefine Readiness Through Competency-Based, Performance-Driven Accountability**

California can build on its success in establishing local control of funding and accountability by expanding accountability measures beyond test scores to include student portfolios, real-world projects, and graduate outcomes that better reflect readiness for 21st century careers and college.

Current Progress: California policymakers' leadership in enacting the Local Control Funding Formula fundamentally transformed how schools are funded and measured, moving from punitive test-based accountability to locally-driven systems that allow districts like Lindsay and Anaheim to focus on authentic student learning.

Implementation Barriers: Standardized testing remains a dominant but incomplete measure of success that fails to capture student engagement, career readiness, or deeper learning. Districts are generally held accountable through compliance-driven metrics, rather than authentic measures of student growth. In addition, conventional state assessments are limited in their ability to fully capture the progress California schools have shown through investments in community schools and other related efforts.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Redefine college and career readiness indicators to focus on authentic academic and work-related success**, rather than just test performance. Include student portfolios of work, performance-based assessments, and real-world projects that better gauge how prepared students are for the 21st century workforce.
- » **Use graduate follow-up data to track long-term student success** in college, careers, and civic life.
- » **Support districts to pilot and scale performance-based assessments**—such as portfolios, capstones, and exhibitions—that align with redefined graduate outcomes.
- » **Explore pathways for recognition and validation of student competencies** (e.g., Career Passports or mastery transcripts) that can be shared with employers and higher education institutions.

5 **Create a System for Innovation and Peer Learning**

California's innovation islands need bridges to spread successful practices across the state. The state can build bridges by funding and creating systematic channels to share what's already working and minimize policy swings and implementation barriers for districts.

Current Progress: California state leadership's strategic investments in the recent \$10 million Secondary School Redesign Pilot Program signals ongoing commitment to scaling effective innovations, enabling districts like those featured in this report to become laboratories of innovation and allowing their transformative practices to serve as models for statewide implementation.

Implementation Barriers: Some California districts and counties have developed highly effective models for enhancing adolescent learning and well-being, but there is no systematic way to identify, spread, and scale these innovations statewide.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Create a statewide innovation fund for adolescent learning and well-being**, with dedicated, multi-year funding and priority given to districts serving low-income students and students of color.
- » **Develop an innovation and learning hub for school systems** to share promising models, strategies, and tools.
- » **Establish a school innovation pilot process** to allow districts to test new models of assessment, scheduling, graduation requirements, or instructional design without being penalized under outdated regulations. Use this process to generate proof points, share learnings, and identify opportunities for regulatory change.
- » **Enact a “stability clause” for education policy** that protects districts from abrupt shifts in state priorities, allowing sustained execution of long-term initiatives.
- » **Establish “systemness innovation grants”** that support local educational agencies in co-developing shared strategies and professional learning models that help them work together.

6

Bridge Secondary and Postsecondary Systems: Align College Admissions with 21st Century Readiness

California’s high school redesign investments are creating innovative forms of student learning and assessment, but risk being constrained by misaligned college admissions criteria. Higher education—in partnership with K-12—can lead efforts to align K-12 outcomes with postsecondary expectations, ensuring that new demonstrations of learning are recognized and valued across the education continuum.

Current Progress: California’s statewide investments in high school redesign through the California Community Schools Partnership Program, the Golden State Pathways Program, and the Dual Enrollment Opportunities Competitive Grant Program have created a strong foundation for reimagining high school experiences—and their alignment with postsecondary pathways.

Implementation Barriers: Despite these investments, high school redesign efforts risk falling short if higher education institutions continue to rely on traditional admissions criteria. California is well positioned to support efforts to align K-12 graduation outcomes with postsecondary expectations, working with colleges and universities to recognize and reward new demonstrations of student learning—such as performance assessments, capstone projects, and mastery-based transcripts—that better reflect 21st century readiness.

Potential Next Steps

- » **Convene a cross-sector advisory group of K-12, higher education, and workforce leaders** to align expectations for student competencies and graduate profiles.
- » Partner with higher education institutions to **pilot admissions practices that accept portfolios, mastery transcripts, or performance-based demonstrations of learning**.
- » Encourage and work with California State University and University of California systems to **expand definitions of college eligibility to recognize pathway completions, dual enrollment achievements, and real-world learning artifacts**.
- » **Develop a shared communications strategy** to signal to families, educators, and employers that deeper learning, creativity, and purpose—not just GPA and standardized tests—are valued and recognized across California’s education continuum.

Anaheim Union High School District

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



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.

“You learn from [mistakes] and you know next time to be more careful or be more gentle with the micro-pipetting or the microscope.”

—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.

The sense of purpose and possibility in the biotech course is a feature, not a bug, of the district.

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.

“We spent so much time just making tests and then testing kids, and we were never even good at it.

*Teachers weren't happy.
Students weren't happy.
Parents weren't happy.”*

—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 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.

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.

Lindsay Unified School District

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



Source: Lindsay Unified School District

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.

“*Learning in this school is mainly in our hands.*”
—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

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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](#)

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.

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.



Source: Lindsay Unified School District

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.

The pairing of a clear vision with steadiness, systemness, and symmetry has paid dividends.

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.



Source: Lindsay Unified School District

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.



Source: Lindsay Unified School District

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.

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.

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.)

“I know I can serve my community in important ways, and I will.”

—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](#)

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.

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.

“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.”

—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.



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.

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.

Building on work that began more than a decade ago, Fresno Unified School District's pathways initiatives have been strengthened by crucial state investments.

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.

Fresno Unified leads the way in reimagining CTE as a place for all students to find purpose in their learning and explore possible futures.

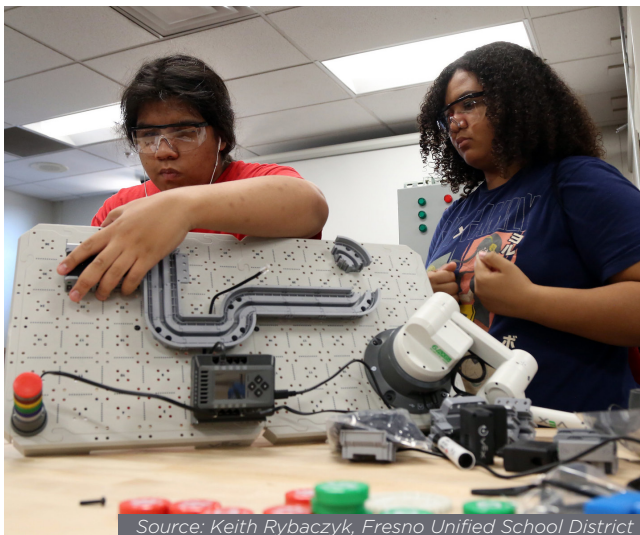
Fresno Unified’s innovative approach dissolves the false choice between college and career preparation

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.



Source: Keith Rybaczyk, Fresno Unified School District

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 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."

“One kid was wearing his teacher academy hoodie from Roosevelt, and another was wearing his medical assistant shirt [...] They're really proud of the programs.”

—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 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 ethos of district-supported experimentation within Fresno Unified has allowed networks of leaders to collaborate on thorny problems.

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.

Shasta County Office of Education

An “Every Student, Every Option” Strategy and Innovative Funding Approaches Transform Rural Education



Source: Shasta County Office of Education

When you step into a high school classroom in Shasta County, in the north of California’s Sacramento Valley, it’s clear the environment aims to prioritize every student’s journey.

Mike, a senior at Enterprise High School, travels daily to another high school to attend a dual enrollment class focused on space engineering. Mike and his classmates are designing a prototype space rover to explore Europa, Jupiter’s moon, to see if it has underground rivers. His work includes virtual simulations and collaboration with NASA scientists, bridging high school learning with cutting-edge career pathways. This program not only nurtures Mike’s technical skills but strengthens his determination to become a space engineer.

Chris, a senior in a continuation high school, found a new sense of purpose through the fire certification program offered by the Shasta-Trinity Regional Occupational Program. Having experienced homelessness, the program helped Chris recover

high school credits, train as a firefighter, and access essential resources. As a result, he’s on track to graduate and begin a career with CalFire or pursue further education.

Shasta COE’s rural hub model enables small districts to achieve outsized impact and strengthens systemwide coherence

Building on nearly two decades of steady work, Shasta County Office of Education (Shasta COE) has benefited tremendously from state funding—including the opportunity to coordinate a 38-school Community Schools consortium. Shasta COE is a testament to how thoughtful state policies can empower county offices of education to serve as regional transformation hubs, enabling small rural districts to access grants and receive implementation support that otherwise would be difficult, if not impossible, to access individually. This compelling structural innovation promotes greater equity in rural

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Shasta County Office of Education is a testament to how thoughtful state policies can empower county offices of education to serve as regional transformation hubs.

areas, offering a model for other communities with similar circumstances.

As a county office serving predominantly small, rural districts—many with fewer than 1,000 students—the Shasta COE functions as both a coordinator and direct service provider. It often serves as the practical equivalent of a district office for schools that lack the capacity to access competitive state grants independently.

The county's students complete high school ready for college and careers at a significantly higher rate than the state average. In doing so, they are beating the odds, given Shasta's historically high rates of mortality, obesity, drug addiction, teen pregnancy, poverty, and unemployment, and given that 70% of high school students are the first in their family to attend college.

And while the statistics matter, and the systemic approach is essential, educators make clear that the work here is also personal. "We don't just teach kids—we raise them. These are our kids, our neighbors' kids," said a school counseling coordinator. "The teachers, the principals—most of them grew up here. We see ourselves in our students, and that's why we push so hard to make sure they have every opportunity we can give them."

“*These are our kids, our neighbors' kids. [...] We see ourselves in our students, and that's why we push so hard to make sure they have every opportunity we can give them.*”

—School counseling coordinator

Shasta COE serves approximately 24 mostly rural school districts that range widely in size. The Redding School District, for example, serves almost 3,000

County Office of Education Profile

Enrollment: Approximately 26,700 students

Student demographics:

- 3% English language learners
- 14% students with disabilities
- 58% low socioeconomic status
- 63% students of color

Location: Shasta County

Community: Rural

College and career readiness score: 35%

Graduation rate: 90%

Chronic absenteeism rate: 18%

SOURCES: DATAQUEST, CA
DASHBOARD, SHASTA COUNTY OFFICE
OF EDUCATION

students, while the Mountain Union Elementary School District has just 64 students. For the smallest districts, Shasta COE operates in all practical matters as the district office. It also directly operates three schools with a total enrollment of 173 students.

The county office is highly regarded for its strong educational outcomes. In 2020, the county had the highest rate of enrollment at top postsecondary institutions among all California's rural counties, which led to recognition by the California School Boards Association with a Golden Bell Award for educational excellence in equity and access.

Shasta COE's transformation began almost 20 years ago with the stark realization that Shasta County led the state on troubling social indicators of health and well-being. From high rates of poverty and unemployment to low levels of educational attainment, the challenges were immense. The COE laid the groundwork for initiatives that prioritized equity, innovation, and collaboration.

Expanding educational opportunities through diverse programs, pathways, and partnerships

The county office of education aims to embody its motto, "Every Student, Every Option," through a comprehensive set of programs and pathways that

empower students to pursue their unique interests, goals, and dreams. Key components of the strategy include:

Open Enrollment: Shasta COE allows students to attend schools outside their immediate geographic boundaries, to better align with their academic and career interests.

Regional Occupational Program and CTE for All: The Shasta-Trinity Regional Occupational Program and the Shasta Union High School District's career technical education (CTE) program provide hands-on training in high-demand fields such as healthcare, firefighting, and automotive technology to students across the county. Students immerse themselves in state-of-the-art facilities, including professional-grade kitchens, fire engines, and medical simulation labs. They work under the guidance of industry professionals to earn certifications for immediate entry into the workforce or further education. Shasta COE also supported the development of CTE pathways in each district and school countywide.

Dual and Concurrent Enrollment: Partnerships with institutions like Shasta College enable high school students to take college-level courses in space engineering, business management, and other areas. "It's incredible to be working on projects like designing a space rover while still in high school," said Mike, the senior at Enterprise High School. "This experience makes my dream of becoming an engineer feel so much closer."

Comprehensive Electives and Personalized Learning: Beyond core academics and specialized programs, Shasta County schools offer electives designed to spark curiosity and creativity, from music and art to advanced robotics and American Sign Language.

Flexible Pathways for Every Student: The county provides alternative education options for students who thrive outside traditional settings. Continuation schools, independent study programs, and online learning platforms offer tailored support to these students.

Shasta COE's tiered counseling approach bridges academic, career, and college readiness supports

Guided by the American School Counselor Association, Shasta COE's systemwide approach aims to ensure that all students receive consistent, high-

“This experience makes my dream of becoming an engineer feel so much closer.”

—Mike, a senior
at Enterprise High School



Source: Shasta County Office of Education

quality support across academic, social-emotional, and career readiness domains. The foundation of the county's school counseling strategy is a comprehensive, tiered framework. Tier 1 support includes lessons on college readiness, mental health awareness, financial literacy, and preparing college financial aid applications. Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports address more individualized needs.

Professional collaboration is another pillar of the counseling strategy. Monthly meetings bring together school counselors, administrators, and the county's counseling coordinator to share resources, analyze data, and refine practices. Counselors also leverage partnerships with Shasta College and local employers to provide dual enrollment opportunities and CTE pathways. A-G completion rates and career readiness in Shasta have improved significantly as a result.

Community schools funding helps create safe spaces for students and families to access resources

An especially powerful example of how state funding has enabled Shasta COE to go the extra mile for families is with the Community Connect initiative, which integrates counseling with other resources, such as help accessing healthcare, housing and even food assistance.

Visiting a Community Connect center reveals the heart of the initiative. At one site, a mother sits with

a “connector” to discuss housing options while her children browse books in a cozy reading nook. Nearby, a high school student picks up a bag of nonperishable food to take home, ensuring his family has meals for the week. On another day, a connector might guide a family through enrolling in Medi-Cal (California’s Medicaid healthcare program) or arranging transportation to a specialist appointment.

State funding for community schools has been a game changer for Community Connect, enabling Shasta COE to expand staffing, enhance services, and create “safe” spaces where families access resources in a welcoming environment. Scaling and diversifying its offerings through California Community Schools Partnership Program funding has helped Community Connect solidify its role as a cornerstone of Shasta COE’s educational and social support infrastructure.

The impact of the initiative is profound and multifaceted. Shasta COE reports that Community Connect has improved student attendance, increased financial and housing stability among families, enhanced trust between schools and communities, and reduced inequitable access to school and community resources.

Shasta COE creates economies of scale by strategically pooling state funds across small rural districts

By carefully aligning available resources with local priorities, the county office has deepened, expanded, and grown impactful programs across districts and

schools. The process begins with a proactive search for state funding opportunities that align with Shasta COE’s core priorities. For example, when California launched funding for community schools, Shasta COE saw an opportunity to enhance its existing Community Connect initiative. Once funding is identified, Shasta COE takes a systematic approach to implementation by assessing needs, developing concrete plans with clear timelines, and establishing accountability measures. The office also provides technical assistance to schools and districts.

By focusing on alignment, capacity building, and sustainability, Shasta COE has created a system that not only meets immediate needs but lays the groundwork for long-term success. “State funds are a powerful tool, but it’s how we use them that makes the difference,” said Superintendent Mike Freeman. “By staying focused on our core priorities, we ensure that every dollar works toward building a stronger, more equitable future for our students.”

At the heart of Shasta COE’s efforts is the belief that education should open doors, not close them. With diverse programs and pathways, the county seeks to ensure students are not limited by geography, circumstances, or preconceived expectations. And yet, the vibrancy in CTE pathways, electives, and dual enrollment across the county is not evident in the academic core. Another area for exploration is developing locally valid and reliable measures of students “thriving” in the county that are difficult, if not impossible, to capture via traditional state measures.

Key Takeaways

- » Shasta COE’s education system exemplifies a commitment to providing diverse and flexible pathways to personalize every student’s educational journey.
- » The county has maintained a consistent trajectory of improvement for nearly 20 years. A culture of collaboration, rooted in robust communication and data-driven practices, has allowed it to test, refine, and scale innovative initiatives.
- » The school counseling strategy aims to ensure that students receive robust academic, social-emotional, and career guidance.
- » Community Connect stands out as a model for integrating schools with community resources to address barriers like housing instability and healthcare access. The infusion of state funds for community schools has expanded staffing, enhanced services, and created welcoming spaces on campuses.
- » Shasta COE’s approach to leveraging state funds ensures alignment with local priorities to maximize long-term impact.

Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

A Commitment to Student Agency, Individualized Pathways, and Collaborative Learning



Source: Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

Walking into a high school in Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, the energy is palpable. Students are immersed in hands-on, inquiry-based learning that allows them to explore their interests, develop skills, and address community challenges. From the hum of digital design studios to the quiet concentration of ceramics workshops, the sense of purpose in these spaces is unmistakable. Students are not just attending school; they are actively shaping their educational journeys.

In a ceramics class, students bring monsters drawn by kindergarteners to life by transforming sketches into three-dimensional pottery. The high schoolers meticulously shape and paint their creations, knowing that soon the young children who drew the monsters will receive their original drawings back along with the handcrafted ceramic versions. The project encapsulates the spirit of learning in Monterey: creativity, connection, and a sense of purpose.

In the Digital Arts and Design studio, students move through a gallery walk, assessing and providing

feedback on each other's portfolios. The portfolios, built since their freshman year, showcase a range of artistic expression—photography, short films, website designs, logos, and animations.

Students are not just attending school; they are actively shaping their educational journeys.

In biochemistry, students in small teams attempt to solve complex problems such as calculating changes in enthalpy in a chemical reaction. Their grades depend not only on individual performance but on the group's collective understanding—an incentive structure that fosters collaboration, peer teaching, and deep engagement.

Innovative state funding has bolstered the district's endeavors, including an \$8.8 million grant awarded in 2024 from the California Community Schools

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

Partnership Program to support both academic and social-emotional support for students and a recent \$500,000 state grant to expand service learning and civic engagement.

Beyond the classroom, Monterey Peninsula Unified high schools work to ensure that students have time in their schedules to explore their passions. The “flex period” at Marina High School allows students to self-select an activity or study session from a rotating menu—from preparing for math finals to making crafts while listening to Taylor Swift. Some students use the time for extra academic support; others dive into personal interests. “The menu changes every other week,” one administrator explains. “Students get a lot of autonomy in deciding how they want to use that time.”

The student experience is shaped by a belief shared among district and school leaders that education should be meaningful, engaging, and tailored to youths’ interests and aspirations. Whether students are designing public art, conducting scientific research, or preparing for a career in the medical fields, they are given the space, resources, and support to pursue their goals. Learning here is not just about accumulating credits—it is about discovery, creativity, and connection.

“*The menu changes every other week [...] Students get a lot of autonomy in deciding how they want to use that time.*”

—Marina High School administrator

Progress in the district is rooted in students feeling seen, supported, and inspired

When a group of students expressed interest in marine biology, their counselor didn’t just note it—they surveyed other students, discovered broader interest, and successfully proposed a new marine biology course that launched the following year. Meanwhile, other students found their passion through an internship at the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s biotechnology lab, where industry mentors helped them see a clear path from high school coursework to college and career.

These stories reflect how the district’s students experience being truly seen, centered, and inspired.

District Profile

Enrollment: Approximately 9,300 students

Student demographics:

- 26% English language learners
- 16% students with disabilities
- 66% low socioeconomic status
- 81% students of color

Location: Monterey County

Community: Suburban

College and career readiness score: 62%

Graduation rate: 95%

Chronic absenteeism rate: 14%

SOURCE: CA DASHBOARD

The comprehensive approach begins with emphasizing authentic, relevant learning activities that develop empowered and engaged critical thinkers with mastery of knowledge and skills. Through initiatives like the Vision 2025+ Task Force, the district analyzes enrollment patterns, student performance data, and community input to make decisions on school configurations, grade levels, and attendance boundaries.

The comprehensive high schools—Monterey High, Seaside High, and Marina High—are designed to ensure that every student feels seen, supported, and inspired to grow. Students are afforded an array of academic and career pathways, tailored schedules, and a culture that encourages exploration, inquiry, and deep engagement.

When a group of students expressed interest in marine biology, their counselor didn’t just note it—they surveyed other students, discovered broader interest, and successfully proposed a new marine biology course that launched the following year.

All three comprehensive high schools offer multiple career technical education (CTE) pathways. At Monterey High School, students choose from biotechnology, transportation, robotics and engineering, sports medicine, theatre, digital media, and dance. Work-based learning specialists help students secure internships, facilitate job shadowing, and coordinate industry guest speakers.

The district takes a data-driven approach to refining CTE offerings. Course requests and career interest surveys guide decisions on which pathways to expand or develop. Many CTE courses are structured to fulfill state A–G requirements, and the district also leverages dual enrollment and concurrent enrollment agreements with local colleges.



Monterey Peninsula Unified centers student wellness and belonging as cornerstones of academic success

Walking through Monterey Peninsula high schools, there is a palpable sense of community. The district seeks to ensure that students feel seen, supported, and valued. Cultivating positive relationships is a priority, evident in the ways school leaders, teachers, and support staff interact with students—through a simple handshake with a principal in the hallway, a personal check-in from a teacher before class, or a guidance counselor stopping by a lunch table to ask how a student’s college applications are going. “We work to create a culture where adults love kids,” says one school leader. “And loving them means holding them accountable, setting high expectations, and making sure they have the support they need to meet them.”

The district prioritizes student wellbeing, having revamped its approach to mental health by embedding systems of support within each high school. For example, the “Zen Den” in Monterey High School’s wellness center offers a quiet, restorative

space where stressed students can take a break, regulate emotions, and receive counseling. “We have students who... just need 15 minutes to decompress in the Zen Den,” explains a school counselor. “Having that space and knowing they are supported makes all the difference.”

Monterey Peninsula Unified also created a resource center to address challenges students face outside school. Recognizing that nearly 10% of students are experiencing homelessness or in foster care, each high school has a designated space stocked with essential supplies—food, clothing, hygiene products, and even a washer and dryer. This holistic approach underscores a belief that when basic needs are met, students can fully engage in learning.

Leaders at Monterey Peninsula Unified understand that a student’s connection to school is a strong predictor of success, so the district creates opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with peers and adults. One example is Breaking Down the Walls, a district-wide program with full-day workshops. Through guided conversations and activities, students share experiences, listen to each other’s stories, and develop a greater appreciation for the struggles and strengths of their peers.

Athletics, performing arts, and career pathways also serve as entry points for connection. Whether it’s the marching band program that was reinstated at the request of students, thriving CTE pathways, or student mentorship programs, Monterey Peninsula Unified aims to ensure that every student can find a place to belong.

Monterey Peninsula Unified encourages agency and autonomy at all levels—for students, educators, and schools

By design, Monterey Peninsula Unified students have a voice in shaping their educational experience. For example, the district builds its master course schedules with student input. Each spring, students complete surveys indicating courses they want, and the district designs schedules accordingly. This same culture of responsiveness extends to student-driven flex periods in which students self-select activities based on their needs and interests—from academic tutoring to creative workshops and personal enrichment.

Underlying these efforts is a central office that is deeply engaged in supporting schools. Monterey

Peninsula Unified prioritizes site-level autonomy while ensuring district-wide consistency in mental health, student engagement, and equity. District leaders are visible and accessible. The district also embraces a data-driven approach to student well-being, using real-time data to track attendance, behavior, and academic engagement.

Monterey Peninsula Unified also displays a commitment to continuous learning and collaboration among educators. Across high schools, the district fosters an environment where teachers, counselors, administrators, and district leaders work together to refine their practice, share insights, and innovate. It's all about cultivating professional trust and site-based autonomy. "The district gives us the flexibility to design our own curriculum, adapt instructional approaches, and create learning experiences that best serve our students," explains one teacher. "We are not boxed into a single pedagogical model—we are encouraged to experiment, collaborate, and continuously refine our craft."

Collaboration between educators within and across schools drives professional learning and innovation

The district takes a data-driven approach to continuous improvement, using real-time data—such as attendance trends, engagement levels, and formative assessments. It proactively supports professional learning, ensuring that teachers,

counselors, and school leaders have access to high-quality development opportunities. This includes district-sponsored professional learning communities, leadership development for principals and assistant principals, and cross-district learning exchanges.

Educators are encouraged to question, innovate, and refine their craft in collaboration with colleagues. As one teacher put it, "We are learning alongside our students. And when we model that for them, we show them that learning is not just something that happens in school—it's a lifelong journey."

Monterey Peninsula Unified has built a strong foundation for student learning and well-being. At the same time, areas where the district can push its impact to the next level include addressing difficulties with teacher retention; increasing consistency in academic rigor, especially for immigrant and multilingual students; and expanding and strengthening partnerships with local businesses, colleges, and industry leaders.

“ *We are not boxed into a single pedagogical model—we are encouraged to experiment, collaborate, and continuously refine our craft.”*

—High school teacher

Key Takeaways

- » Students in Monterey Peninsula Unified have a say in shaping their educational experience, from flexible scheduling to course creation based on their interest.
- » Learning experiences are designed to be relevant, meaningful, and inquiry-driven, whether that's through collaborating in biochemistry labs, creating digital arts portfolios, or pursuing career technical education pathways.
- » Relationships are at the heart of the educational model at Monterey Peninsula Unified. Schools are designed to be welcoming, safe, and deeply supportive.
- » Mental health and student well-being are prioritized through a comprehensive, multi-tiered support system. Each high school has full-time mental health professionals and dedicated spaces like the Zen Den, where students can take a break when overwhelmed.
- » Real-world opportunities are highly valued, with career technical education programs fully integrated into the student experience. Pathways in biotechnology, digital media, sports medicine, and transportation are designed to be both career- and college-aligned.
- » Teachers benefit from structured collaboration time, instructional coaching, and cross-school learning exchanges. The district prioritizes teacher agency.



Source: Keith Rybaczyk/Fresno Unified School District

