



## A Governance Perspective

Interviews with School Board Members from  
the Nine Linked Learning Initiative School Districts

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# **A Governance Perspective:** Interviews with School Board Members from the Nine Linked Learning Initiative School Districts

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## **Executive Summary**

This report summarizes interviews with school board members from the nine districts that were part of The James Irvine Foundation's Linked Learning Initiative. The purpose of the interviews was to provide school board members' perspectives on implementing and sustaining the Linked Learning approach. The interviews addressed: the impetus for Linked Learning in each district; resource needs; communication and community outreach; stakeholder input; student supports; business, community, and district partnerships; teacher placement, professional development, and support; career pathways; indicators of success; and school board members' advice to colleagues in districts that were initiating the Linked Learning approach. Themes that emerged from the interviews include the importance of: school board member outreach; time to develop, implement, and sustain the approach; time for teachers and students to carry out instructional and career-related activities; cohesion among board members; relationships with a range of partners; and the collection and use of information for purposes of outreach and improvement.

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## **Introduction**

This is the second publication in a CSBA series on the Linked Learning approach to high school reform. This report provides school board members' perspectives on initiating and sustaining Linked Learning in the nine districts that were early implementers of the approach as part of The James Irvine Foundation Linked Learning Initiative.<sup>1</sup> The Initiative was launched in 2009 to help California school districts develop and implement plans for expanding Linked Learning. In addition to district grants, the Foundation provides Initiative districts with technical assistance and coaching. The Initiative also includes a strong evaluation component designed to determine changes in student achievement and other outcomes between 2009 and 2015.<sup>2</sup> The interviews summarized in this report cover several aspects of Linked Learning including: initial decision-making, resources, communication, student supports, and partnerships.

## Background

*The four central elements of the Linked Learning approach:*

1. A-g courses emphasizing real world applications
2. Technical core of courses that meet industry standards
3. Systemic approach to work-based learning
4. Personalized academic, socio-emotional, and other student supports

Linked Learning is a comprehensive approach to high school reform that includes the strategies of cross-disciplinary instruction; career-themed experiences and content; and opportunities for solving real-life problems in order to increase student motivation, engagement, and learning. Linked Learning is equity-focused and has the specific goal of providing all students—particularly students of color and low-income students—with the opportunity to access the instruction, guidance, and experience that will lead to the capabilities and behaviors they will need to succeed in both college and career. The approach aims to prepare all students to be able to make choices about post-secondary options that are based on their wishes, not on the limitations of their preparation. Therefore, Linked Learning identifies college and career readiness skills as a necessary foundation for students no matter what they might choose to do after high school.

Collaboration is a hallmark of Linked Learning: partnerships with a range of individuals and entities are essential to the approach. Linked Learning partners include longstanding career-focused programs (such as those of Regional Occupational Programs/Centers) as well as business enterprises and community organizations that provide students with career-themed content and real-world learning and work opportunities. Because Linked Learning is a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary approach, it also requires collaboration among district office staff, between district offices and schools, and among teachers and leaders at school sites.

A fundamental Linked Learning strategy for eliminating achievement gaps is to provide all students with access to a rigorous college preparatory academic curriculum. Linked Learning does not define access as simply enrolling students in a-g classes but includes access to academic and other supports that students may need in order to succeed in rigorous a-g coursework. Another foundational Linked Learning strategy for closing achievement gaps is career-themed instruction and experience. This aspect of Linked Learning increases students' understanding and motivation as they learn through real-world problems and provides students with experience that builds the skills, knowledge and behaviors necessary for career success.

Providing assistance to develop teacher capacity is another fundamental strategy of the Linked Learning Initiative. Teachers who have capabilities, professional skill, and attitudes that will promote students' opportunity to learn are integral to achieving the Linked Learning goal of providing underserved and underperforming students with access to effective instruction that will lead to closing achievement gaps. Such teachers: (1) hold expectations for the success of students of color and low-income students; (2) use inter- and intra-disciplinary collaboration in curriculum design and delivery; (3) develop lessons using problem- and project-based learning; (4) foster industry and postsecondary education partnerships; and (4) create learning experiences that integrate career-technical standards, academic standards, and work-based learning experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Linked Learning is a significant departure from the current approach in most high schools. The key features of Linked Learning: partnerships across departments, among teachers, and with community and businesses; cross-disciplinary planning and instruction; and rigorous curriculum for all students—including those deemed “high needs” who often do not enroll in a-g courses—require new ways of thinking and acting for districts and schools. Making such a comprehensive approach work, both initially and in the long run, requires the cooperation, strategic thinking, and dedicated effort of many stakeholders, not the least of which are school board members.

## Impetus and Initial Decisions

Eight of the nine school board members interviewed for this report indicated that the Linked Learning approach was adopted in their districts because of a need to significantly improve student achievement. School board members said that their districts were compelled to seek improvements because of poor outcomes—e.g. high dropout rates, poor test scores, and low college attendance—of district high school students. This includes one district where high school performance was consistently low enough to result in a threat of state sanctions. In addition, most of these districts built Linked Learning on earlier reforms. Five of the school board members who cited the need to improve student achievement as a fundamental incentive to adopt Linked Learning also said that Linked Learning evolved from reforms in which the district was already engaged. One school board member said that these previous reforms were the single greatest impetus to Linked Learning. School board members made comments like, “Linked Learning was an evolution,” “it grew out of a combination of reforms,” or “it was a continuation” of earlier reforms. These foundational reforms included small learning communities, academies, and career technical education programs. In the words of one board member:

*Linked Learning was an intersection of what worked about [earlier] models combined with what worked about career technical education combined with the right time and place.*

Information and encouragement from district staff was another significant contributor to the choice to implement Linked Learning in some districts. Several school board members said that a district superintendent or assistant superintendent, and in one case a former school board member, provided much of the background information, inspiration, and legwork that went into the initial decision to adopt Linked Learning. School board members increased their understanding of Linked Learning through sessions with professional providers, at conferences, and by participating in site visits. Several mentioned the importance of the professional development opportunities supported by The James Irvine Foundation for districts that had received grants as part of the Linked Learning Initiative. Of the five school board members who discussed site visits as a major source of their Linked Learning knowledge, three talked about visiting other districts and two mentioned regular visits to Linked Learning sites in their own districts.

When asked about the most important decisions they had made regarding Linked Learning, several of these board members replied that their most critical decision was also the most fundamental: the choice to adopt Linked Learning as the means to improve high school student outcomes in the district and to strongly commit to long-range support for the approach. This basic decision set the stage for the board’s ongoing attention to Linked Learning. As expressed by one school board member, “from then on the board has viewed every decision about K-8 through a Linked Learning lens.”

Sometimes the decision to adopt Linked Learning was part of a larger strategic plan to improve student outcomes and increase college and career readiness. For example, one district set a goal of work-based

learning for all students, and another established the goal that by 2016, all students would be in a pathway and 90% of the pathways would be Linked Learning-certified.

Three of the board members explicitly mentioned the central importance of the board's decision about resources. That is, their decision to dedicate the necessary resources to effectively implement and sustain Linked Learning over time was the most important decision the board made with regard to the approach. The decisions about how they would use these dedicated funds were similar across the districts. For the most part, resources were designated for certain fundamental expenditures, particularly professional development. Nonetheless, the use of resources for Linked Learning varied to some extent according to the particular needs and characteristics of each district.

All but one of the nine school board members said that a number of district, school, and community stakeholders had provided advice that contributed to the initial board decision to support the Linked Learning approach. Depending on the district, these stakeholders included some combination of teachers, the bargaining unit, business partners, community partners, higher education representatives, and students. One board member commented that while the board and the district had done a good job of involving the business community, they had not been as successful in connecting with the wider community and teachers. Another said that because Linked Learning grew up from a grassroots movement at school sites, stakeholder input was local and did not involve the broader district community.

Finally, two school board members discussed the importance of deciding to offer students a choice, each noting that their district should (and did) provide students the opportunity to opt in or out of Linked Learning. They expressed the view that while they strongly supported the approach, that "Linked Learning for all" was not the right goal in their districts.

## The Importance of Communication and Outreach

These school board members discussed the importance of sending an unequivocal message regarding the board's strong commitment to Linked Learning. One school board member shared an experience that sent a message reinforcing the strength of the governance team's support for the approach:

*We hired an administrator at one high school and we had to let him go because of his lack of vision around Linked Learning. This was a big wake-up call to stakeholders "oh, my board and superintendent are serious about this." It sent out a strong message.*

These school board members devoted significant energy and time to serving as liaisons to the community. Several said they engaged in regular outreach to the business community in order to recruit partners and that these efforts included presentations to the chamber of commerce, service clubs, and at other community events.

School board members said that outreach in order to recruit students to Linked Learning sites was a role of district staff, and in most of these districts such efforts were substantial. For example, one superintendent made presentations about Linked Learning at every elementary, middle, and high school in the district; other districts held fairs or meetings in order for all 8th graders to learn about and select potential pathways. Only two of the eight school board members said that their districts did not invest a great deal of effort in outreach. Both of these board members also noted this as an area where they would like to make improvements and see greater effort in the future.

Finally, most of these districts had built awareness of Linked Learning through local media coverage, including one district that ran ads on buses and in movie theatres. Two more mentioned coverage on their in-house television stations and content on district Web pages.

### **Communication Challenges**

Communication about Linked Learning was especially important given that challenges related to “attitude or thinking” were among those most often mentioned by these school board members. Examples of such attitudes included stakeholder concerns that the approach might re-segregate students or that Linked Learning was too limiting to student course choices. Another concern in some district communities was that the approach lacked academic rigor:

*One problem we have is that some parents are afraid of what it will do to the school. These parents are not concerned about a-g. These parents bring up Advanced Placement and ask: ‘why are you taking that away from my student?’ A-g for all will not sell the idea of rigor to all folks.*

A board member from another district had heard similar stakeholder concerns about rigor:

*Linked Learning sites are at the intersection of a movement to raise academic rigor of schools and to have higher expectations for students who have high needs and ensure their higher achievement...one challenge is that people assume that Linked Learning is not academic.*

Finally, one board member noted the importance of the board role in meeting these communication challenges:

*The temptation is to see a contradiction between the a-g and career focus of Linked Learning. It is going to take leadership to keep folks focused and not encamped in an idea of either or, but on the idea of doing both well.*

### **Resources**

School board members said that an important board role is to ensure the availability of the necessary financial resources to support Linked Learning. One board member commented that the funds needed to support Linked Learning are somewhat more than those required for the standard high school approach, but that “you get more bang for the buck.” Another noted that although the approach may require more resources, districts can and should look for funds to support Linked Learning from a variety of sources:

*We need to get out of the notion that somehow we can keep funding in silos. We need to look at collaborative funding with community colleges, adult education, and career education... and also look for money from industry and our vendors.*

The decision to devote the necessary resources to Linked Learning was not a contentious one in most of these districts: the school boards that these board members represented did not have difficulty in establishing consensus to devote the resources needed to support Linked Learning. Several different board members made comments like, “it wasn’t a hard sell to the board,” “we were all on the same page,” and “it was never a point of contention.”

Board members said that once they made the decision and commitment to support Linked Learning as a central approach to addressing the needs of district students, it gave staff the direction on how to proceed, i.e., to look at various programs and funding sources in order to put together the necessary resources to support Linked Learning. As one board member said, “The board starts with broader goals and then engages in a back and forth process regarding how to achieve these goals.” Strategizing about how and where to get the resources for Linked Learning was ongoing. As one board member said in reference to these resources, “We are all on the same page but there is still a lot to figure out about how to make it work.”

These board members most often mentioned the need for resources to support human capacity-building. That is, resources for hiring and building teachers’ and administrators’ skills and knowledge to be effective in the Linked Learning context (see below).

School board members also mentioned a range of other resource needs, time major among them. They said that Linked Learning required financial resources to provide time for:

1. Students to participate in all aspects of the Linked Learning approach: classes, career-related activities, and the necessary supports;
2. Teachers and students to engage in career-related advising;
3. School and district staff to recruit for and supervise career themes or internships; and
4. School and district staff to develop and promote Linked Learning in K-8.

As mentioned above, some districts also had certain unique needs for resources. For example, in one district that was geographically spread out, resources were also used for transportation to ensure that no student would be denied access to a pathway because of an inability to get to the school site where it was offered.

### ***Teacher Resources***

The most important and costly resources in schools are teachers: students will not learn well, no matter what the program, if they do not have committed and skilled teachers. Therefore, although these school board members said that they used funds for time and transportation as well as labs and materials, they most often mentioned the importance of funds for hiring well-prepared and experienced teachers who would be effective in a Linked Learning setting, and for building the skills of teachers and other personnel. One school board member noted the possibility of looking to partners for human resources, saying:

*It is not just a question of money but also resources that are relational meaning that our partner organizations—for example, tech firms, hospitals—we are looking for our partners to dedicate human resources to this effort. That is as or more important than monetary resources.*

Most of these districts—all but two—did not ask teachers to change sites and did not place teachers purposefully at Linked Learning schools. Rather, the decision regarding which teachers were best suited for working in the Linked Learning context was made at the site level. This decision was almost always a result of self-selection: teachers who were interested and excited about Linked Learning were those initially assigned to the approach. Often these teachers then convinced their colleagues to participate.

As one board member noted, “You start with those teachers who are willing, able, and enthusiastic and then others get on board over time.” The central role that teachers can have in setting direction in the Linked Learning context was emphasized by two of these school board members. They indicated that what happens with Linked Learning in their districts is largely “teacher driven” and that the initial pathways in the district resulted as “teachers got together to decide what pathways they wanted to teach.” Nonetheless, this approach to teacher selection does not work out in every instance. In one district where this self-selection process has happened organically, “As cohorts of teachers have formed and the Linked Learning approach has developed, staff are beginning to discuss the possible need to remove some teachers from the approach.”

Board members from only two districts said that the process of identifying and selecting teachers for the Linked Learning approach took place at the district level. One said that district leaders identified teachers “who were already most suited to do the work and placed them in pathways.” This board member went on to comment that this approach “does not offer much teacher buy-in, and that should be an important element of teacher placement.” Another board member said that the district staff asked principals to identify the most interested and passionate teachers to work in the Linked Learning context:

*We brought all the teachers into the conversation early so they felt a sense of buy-in. Unions played a part in identifying interested teachers as well. The union reps invited school staff in to a union meeting presentation on Linked Learning, and then asked the teachers if any of them were interested. We made sure to pull a mix of teacher experience levels in order to not bleed all the talent from the conventional school sites.*

### **Resource Challenges**

Several of these school board members said that the overall issue of inadequate state education funding significantly impacts Linked Learning. In the words of one school board member, “It is a challenge to provide a stable and consistent environment in an ever-changing policy environment including one in which school funding has been inconsistent.” For example, maintaining adequate staff during the last several years when districts were experiencing teacher layoffs has been a daunting challenge according to several of these board members. While one school board member called the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) “a good challenge” this board member added that nonetheless, maintaining Linked Learning in the context of the LCFF was an example of the ongoing need to adapt to an ever-changing policy environment.

Several school board members mentioned the funding challenge of marshalling the resources to “institutionalize and stabilize” the Linked Learning approach. In the words of one board member, “Linked Learning is an investment and to pretend it is not is to do our kids a disservice.” Another had a fairly positive perspective on Linked Learning funding, saying that the resources challenge is one of logistics because, “Staff, the union, and the board agree that the budget has to be rearranged to make it a reality, so the only challenge is the time and effort to do that.”

In some districts the parameters of the teacher contract posed a resource challenge. For example, one board member mentioned the challenge of the six-period-day teacher contract that did not allow time for the community outreach, collaboration, and advising that are necessary to the Linked Learning approach. Another talked about the requirement of providing professional development on a range of state mandates, which reduces the available time and resources for professional development on skills to support Linked Learning.

## Career Pathways

There were a number of Linked Learning career pathways represented among these districts. The most common pathways were those in engineering, law-related fields, health, environmental science, and the arts: most had pathways in these areas. Examples of other pathways that were less common among these districts were hospitality and tourism, agriculture, and business. The choice of district pathways was driven by a number of factors, and how these choices were made varied across districts. Several school board members mentioned that pathways were selected because of employment opportunities in the region. Some were driven by teachers, based on their interest and skill (as discussed above). And, school board members from three districts said that pathways decisions were driven by an advisory group. These three districts had advisory committees that included staff, business, and community partners who worked together to establish the career pathways. The advisory groups' choice of pathways was "based on what is the need in the area, what would provide students a job when they are done with school, and the available internships in the surrounding areas."

It should be noted that several of these school board members commented that the particular career pathway in which students participate "is not the point." They expressed the view that Linked Learning students benefit in a number of ways no matter what the career pathway. Benefits they cited were that students:

- Gain the soft skills (e.g. interpersonal skills, ability to work as part of a team, and business etiquette) that employers identify as highly desirable and necessary for success in the workplace,
- Increase and deepen their learning through application and collaboration, and
- Learn from teachers who have built their skills through the professional development offered as part of the Linked Learning Initiative and who are inspired by the approach.

## Partnerships

### *Value of Partnerships*

As one board member noted, the partners are what make Linked Learning work:

*You can't have Linked Learning without partners. That's the whole point: that school is not limited by the four walls and doesn't stop at the gate: that is, in Linked Learning, school is not limited by the confines of what we traditionally think of as school.*

Most of these school board members discussed the importance of partnerships from the perspective of the concrete benefits they provide to students: helping build students' passion for careers or college, helping ground students in what they will need for college and career success, and giving them the opportunity to build their confidence. In addition, some of these board members discussed how partnerships build partners' awareness of and respect for students talents, noting that the partnerships provide an opportunity for business and community partners to see what students can do:

*Having the partners see the students engaged at the level they are. The investment in students is the key to the long-term bottom line and success of businesses. They now see they are part of the long-term solution. They are a part of a movement. They see the tangible results.*

Of the eight school board members who answered our questions about partnerships, all discussed the importance of partners both within and outside the district and all had at least two or three partners—some had many. Several school board members discussed the importance of their in-district partnership with the regional occupational program (ROP) as well as across different district departments and offices. Among the community and business partners mentioned by these school board members were local industries, businesses, chambers of commerce, county offices of education, parents, and elected officials such as the city council and the mayor. Another type of partnership identified as important was higher education institutions: community colleges and state colleges and universities. In three of these districts the partners are part of a coalition or advisory group. These partners have a role in supporting the Linked Learning work both as individual entities and as part of these coalitions.

### **Partnership Challenges**

The difficulty these school board members mentioned most often with regard to establishing and maintaining Linked Learning partnerships had to do with communication. A principal challenge was how to communicate to businesses and other partners that a partnership would benefit both the student and the business partner. One school board member expressed a slightly different perspective on the same issue: the importance of being respectful of business partners and keeping in mind that these partners should gain something from the relationship as well. According to this school board member:

*The challenge is to show the partnership is two way: the relationship is not just so they can do something for you but you have to be respectful of them, develop a common vocabulary and see how the relationship can be mutually beneficial.*

School board members reported the importance of communicating district and/or school commitment to business partners. One noted that this is important in order to dispel a commonly held notion that the education field is inconsistent.

*Education has a reputation of “this is the latest and greatest and then on to the next initiative.” Convincing folks that Linked Learning is the long-term strategy because if not, they don’t want to buy-in. Communicating that there are so many parts to the program because it is more than just a career themes program and being able to distill that message and communicate it to partners.*

One school board member said that maintaining personnel who knew about and worked in the Linked Learning context was a challenge both for the school and for the business partners:

*We have a lot of individuals who are committed, but they move or retire. We are trying to embed a way to address that into the system. The partner at a business also might retire and that connection is broken. How do you institutionalize it in a team setting instead of an individual connection?*

## **Instruction and Student Support**

One of the most fundamental goals of Linked Learning is to provide access to a rigorous a-g academic curriculum for all students, no matter what their level of previous preparation. Linked Learning facilitates this access through cross-disciplinary instruction, learning in the context of a career focus, and academic supports. All of these school board members mentioned multiple ways that the Linked Learning sites in

their districts helped students meet the demands of rigorous a-g courses—including students who may not have come to high school fully prepared for that rigor. They most often mentioned Linked Learning’s overall approach to instruction as the key to ensuring student success, i.e., that courses which are “contextualized,” “tied to students’ interests through the career focus,” and “relevant,” provide the greatest help to students by contributing to their engagement and motivation, which in turn promotes their success.

### *Student Supports*

Almost all of these school board members said that their districts provide extra support to Linked Learning students through: (1) tutoring during or after school, or in some cases both; (2) additional time for students to learn, for teachers to plan and collaborate, and for students and teachers to meet; and (3) social-emotional supports through counseling and advising. One school board member also said that the district provides intervention or “boot camp” classes to give students a head start on the skills they will need in a more rigorous curriculum.

### *Challenges of Instruction and Student Supports*

One school board member said that overall, providing the necessary supports to ensure students’ academic success was an ongoing challenge and therefore, a perennial focus of the district. A challenge often mentioned by these school board members was establishing and maintaining a stable team of district- and school-level people and building the team’s skills to coordinate and teach in the Linked Learning context. They were particularly concerned with meeting the challenge of ensuring adequate teacher skill. More specifically, they were challenged by the need to ensure that students had appropriate and high-quality instruction by providing adequate support for teachers to gain the skills they need through professional development and access to collaboration and planning time. Board members also expressed the challenge of ensuring sufficient time for students to receive the support necessary to help them succeed in academically rigorous a-g courses.

Several school board members mentioned a challenge related to the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS). That is, determining to what extent the Linked Learning curriculum would fit with the CCSS and how to teach to those standards within the Linked Learning context.

Finally, there were some organizational challenges related to student participation in work-based learning experiences. One challenge mentioned in this regard was determining how to get students to and from internships safely and efficiently. Another was designing a master schedule to include both work-based learning and academic courses.

## **Support for Teachers**

Notwithstanding their discussion of the challenges of building teacher capacity, these school board members were unanimous in reporting that their school districts support teachers to work effectively in the Linked Learning context by providing adequate professional development and time for collaboration. As one noted, providing teacher support is ongoing like all aspects of Linked Learning: “We have to continue to provide intervention for teachers as well as students.” Board members also noted that collaboration and professional development are intertwined: collaboration and working with communities of practice serve to build teachers’ professional skills and knowledge. Examples of comments regarding why this collaboration was important included to “develop a team perspective” and “to give teachers opportunities to learn from

each other.” One school board member talked about a recent district decision that would institutionalize collaboration time:

*We’re in the process of negotiation with the bargaining unit and putting in language regarding collaboration time and that was a big deal. We made changes to the contract requiring that Linked Learning teachers have collaboration time of one hour every other week.*

While the fundamental purpose of professional development is to build teacher skill in order to improve instruction, some school board members mentioned additional positive outcomes of Linked Learning professional development. These included improving teacher confidence and creating excitement and motivation for teaching, both of which they noted can lead to better instruction. Finally, two of these school board members said that their Linked Learning teachers participated in professional development in the form of internships with business partners, one commenting, “It is one thing for a teacher to stand up and say ‘this is what a job will feel like’ but another for the teacher to actually experience that and be talking from that experience.”

## Indicators of Success

### *Student Outcomes*

School board members in most of these districts reported using a range of student indicators to determine Linked Learning success. Linked Learning students in all of their districts have, on average, shown improvements on a number of measures compared to similar district students who do not participate in Linked Learning. For example, of the six school board members who answered this question, all said the Linked Learning students have higher graduation rates, four mentioned higher test scores, and three noted better attendance. Two each said that Linked Learning students more often attend or apply to college and less often have discipline problems.

One school board member reported positive Linked Learning student outcomes that are not related to test scores or graduation rates. One of these outcomes is the positive relationships that students develop with their teachers and their peers as a result of being part of a Linked Learning cohort:

*A dynamic of what happens among kids and between kids and teachers who stay together across time in academies is that kids have more respect for each other and help each other because they have developed relationships with peers and teachers as they travel through high school together.*

This same school board member said that an overall outcome of Linked Learning has been that students are prepared “for a better life, to be more responsible citizens, to be more confident, to be the next generation of good citizens.”

### *Other Indicators of Success*

While student success is the ultimate and most important goal of Linked Learning, the approach can contribute to positive outcomes in other areas as well. Of the seven school board members who discussed such additional successes, four talked about this in relation to teachers: teacher satisfaction, expertise, and reduced attrition. As one said:

*Linked Learning has energized a lot of teachers. Teachers find it rewarding to have a classroom full of engaged kids. It is a lot more work but they find more job satisfaction.*

Another commented on “the very strong teacher professional development” associated with Linked Learning resulting in strong teacher expertise, and another said that Linked Learning teachers are more satisfied so they “stay and don’t leave schools or transfer to another system.”

School board members mentioned Linked Learning’s positive impact on various other stakeholders as well. Three of these talked about the improved relations with a range of partners, mentioning those from the business community in particular. “There is a synergistic relationship among all the partners and the school sites and it has been positive for everyone.”

## **School Board Members’ Advice**

We ended these interviews by asking school board members what advice they would give to their colleagues in districts that are initiating or considering the Linked Learning approach. For the most part, school board members’ advice differed according to their districts’ experience with Linked Learning. The single shared comment—made by about half of these board members—was the necessity of gaining consensus as a board that Linked Learning is the right thing to do. One talked about the importance of “getting everyone on the same page and working together” and another said, “It is such a key to have a cohesive board...it has to be fully embraced in order to work.” One school board member commented that colleagues in other districts, who were trying to implement Linked Learning without this consensus, reported that they had been unable to make the necessary changes. Only one school board member we interviewed said that board support for Linked Learning in the district was somewhat tenuous.

One reason school board members stressed the importance of cohesion is that Linked Learning is a comprehensive reform that requires changes to the way things are done throughout the system and to make it work takes the commitment not only of the board, but throughout the district and community. As expressed by one board member:

*It is important to remember that Linked Learning is not a program but an approach and requires commitment and hard work for staff, community, parents, students, and teachers and time for planning and development and establishing reasonable goals. Everyone has to be on board: the board, district staff, site administrators, district administrators, and teachers all have to be on board and working together: they have to believe in it. It is hard but it works.*

Another aspect of this commitment, according to board members, is that it must be sustained over the long run because such fundamental and far-reaching change takes time. These districts’ successful Linked Learning approaches have developed over several years and these school board members report that the work to make them even better is ongoing.

Other advice from board members included the following:

- Board members need to educate themselves about Linked Learning. This includes hearing from students about their experiences and successes.

- “Start with the strongest teachers. As you have success, build on that and encourage those teachers to urge other teachers to become involved.”
- While “Linked Learning is a great opportunity for kids,” it is important that as it is rolled out “to step back and re-evaluate on a regular basis” to see what is working and what needs to be part of the ongoing conversation to improve the program.
- There is good evidence that hands-on learning works, so embed it in the district culture so that it becomes institutionalized.
- Build partnerships across and outside of the district early in the process of developing the Linked Learning approach.
- Building political and board support is vital. School board members need to be the biggest advocates for Linked Learning in the district.

Finally, one school board member had a short but strong message for fellow school board members in districts where Linked Learning is being considered: “Yes! Do it! It really works. You really, really should do it. My experience with Linked Learning has been tremendous.”

## Conclusion

These nine interviews shed light on school board members’ experiences with and perspectives on implementing and supporting Linked Learning in their school districts. Several themes emerged across these interviews with regard to the school board roles, actions, and attitudes that can foster the success of Linked Learning.

- **Outreach:** These school board members play an ongoing and active role as ambassadors for Linked Learning in their communities at large and among key stakeholders including: parents, business partners, community organizations, district staff partners, and among their fellow school board members. This role is especially critical as the Linked Learning approach requires connection and collaboration among a range of partners.
- **Time:** To be successful, board members said that Linked Learning requires time in two crucial senses. Linked Learning is a fundamental and far-reaching high school reform and requires time to build the necessary human capacity as well as the relational and organizational structure to support it. School board members’ understanding of the long-term commitment that this requires and their commitment to “stay the course” is essential. Linked Learning also requires time (1) for teachers to learn, collaborate, and plan in a cross-disciplinary manner and (2) for students to engage in internships, mentorships, and other career-focused activities, in addition to their classroom coursework and any supports necessary to help them meet the demands of a rigorous a-g curriculum. School board and district decisions about the use and allocation of resources to support this extra time are essential to making Linked Learning work.
- **Cohesion:** Linked Learning is based on a philosophy of equity. It embraces high expectations in an a-g curriculum for all students through combining career-related experiences with rigorous instruction and the supports to help students meet that rigor. Achieving these goals is a complex endeavor that requires a significant detour from how most high schools are currently run. These goals necessitate that board

members and staff believe in and support them (and the Linked Learning approach to meeting them) and work together with staff and the community to ensure that they are met. Such a fundamental shift cannot be achieved without this cohesion of purpose, open commitment of intent, and strong and frequent communication of support.

- **Relationships:** Linked Learning is dependent on intersecting sets of partnerships among a wide range of stakeholders. Therefore, relationships across the spectrum of district and community stakeholders including site principals, teachers, parents, business and community leaders and groups, and among board members, are central to the approach. School boards play a critical role in initiating and sustaining these relationships, particularly those with community and business partners, among board members, and between the board and district staff.
- **Information:** The importance of information emerged as a theme in these interviews. Board members said that central to effectively promoting Linked Learning was learning as much as possible about the approach and sharing this information with the community and fellow board members. They also talked about the importance of collecting data on how students are doing in Linked Learning and using this information both to make needed improvements and to share student successes.

These school board members generously shared their views and experiences about implementing and maintaining Linked Learning in their school districts. The information they provided in these interviews expands the knowledge about how school boards can facilitate the development and ongoing support of Linked Learning in other California school districts.

## Endnotes

- 1 We interviewed school board members from the: Antioch, Oakland, Porterville, Los Angeles, Montebello, Pasadena, West Contra Costa, Sacramento City, and Long Beach Unified School Districts.
- 2 Evaluation of the Linked Learning Initiative is being conducted by the Center for Education Policy at SRI International and by ConnectEd.
- 3 Adapted from a description of the Linked Learning focus in the single subject credential preparation by Nancy Farnan of San Diego State University. PowerPoint presentation to the Commission on Teacher Credentialing available in pdf format at: <http://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/TAP/2012-10-TAP-linked-learning.pdf>