



Linked Learning

Using Learning Time Creatively to Prepare Students for College and Career

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Introduction and summary

American public education is in a constant state of experimentation, with new waves of reforms and education initiatives unveiled routinely—many recycled and some reinvented. Yet few are truly innovative. The newest and most promising reform thus far are the Common Core State Standards, which are rigorous standards in English language arts and mathematics implemented in elementary through high school.¹ These standards require new approaches to teaching and learning that ensure all students are adequately prepared for postsecondary education and careers without the need for remediation.

New standards certainly offer new challenges; but they also provide new opportunities to fundamentally change the American public education system. This can be especially transformative for traditionally underserved students who historically have been ill prepared for life after high school, as evidenced by student achievement data for these students. The 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that only 26 percent of the nation's 12th-grade students are proficient or advanced in mathematics, and only 38 percent are proficient or advanced in reading. For African American and Hispanic students, the numbers are even more dismal: African American students scored the lowest of all subgroups at 7 percent proficiency in math and 16 percent in reading, while Hispanic students scored 12 percent in math and 23 percent in reading.² These data are not only disheartening but also signify the incredibly challenging task of ensuring that student success is at the center of every reform initiative and policy decision going forward.

A California-led initiative called Linked Learning offers a promising systemic approach to reform that is designed to address these challenges and has been touted as a suitable complement to implementing the Common Core State Standards.³ As this report will describe, the Linked Learning approach includes multiple elements that provide high school students with a rigorous academic core and hands-on real world learning experiences that prepare students for both college and careers. As we will explain below, high school reform strategies such as Linked Learning require the intentional and strategic use of time to accomplish ambitious goals that result in positive outcomes for students who are traditionally underserved.

This report highlights the efforts of high schools implementing multiple Linked Learning pathways in the Los Angeles Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, Porterville Unified School District, and Sacramento Unified School District. Each of these pathways has reconfigured the use of time in order to provide students with a more effective learning experience. Building on the lessons learned from these districts, as well as our collective expertise in high school reform and high-quality increased learning time, the Center for American Progress and the Alliance for Excellent Education make the following recommendations, which are explained in greater detail at the end of this report:

- Districts should give schools the flexibility to redesign their master schedules so that teachers and students have the necessary time to implement effective approaches to high school reform such as Linked Learning.
- Learning from the California experience, states should enact high school reform policy to provide effective college and career pathways for students.
- The reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, specifically Title II, Part A should clearly articulate that funds may be used for common planning time and professional development between career and technical education, or CTE, and academic teachers.
- Congress should increase funding and flexibility for 21st Century Community Learning Centers.
- Congress should fund the Obama administration's proposal for a high school redesign program that includes support for the more strategic use of time.
- The U.S. Department of Education should increase resources and technical support to ensure high-quality implementation of increased learning time in School Improvement Grant schools.
- States should reform funding policies, whether through general funds or categorical programs, to permit and incentivize schools to more creatively use time.

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The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those who are traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. www.all4ed.org

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