

## **Expanded Learning Opportunities: A More Comprehensive Approach to Preparing High School Students for College and a Career**

The future of the American economy increasingly depends on more students graduating from high school ready for college and a career. Long-standing trends in the nation's dropout rate and achievement gap demonstrate that the American education system needs to better prepare students to meet postsecondary and career demands. While momentum is building to expand learning time for students to help meet these challenges, most efforts have been focused on elementary and middle school students.<sup>1</sup> This issue brief will look beyond the matter of learning time to consider how expanded learning opportunities—including innovations regarding where, when, and how high school students experience teaching and learning—can help overcome the unique challenges faced by today's high school students.

Although some schools and districts are graduating students who are ready for the rigor of college and the workplace, many of the nation's high school students are still struggling. Almost three out of ten students fail to graduate from high school within four years, and the number of over-age, undercredited students continues to plague American secondary education.<sup>2</sup> Even among those who do graduate from high school, only about one in four students is deemed college ready in all four tested subjects on the ACT, and one in three students will need to take at least one remedial course at the postsecondary level.<sup>3</sup>

Together these challenges have significant implications for the nation's economy. According to estimates by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (the Center), the share of jobs in the U.S. economy needing a postsecondary degree will increase to 63 percent in the next decade. This will require 22 million new employees with postsecondary degrees; at the current pace, the nation will fall at least 3 million postsecondary degrees short.<sup>4</sup>

The Center's projections highlight an unfortunate long-term economic trend—one that places a particular focus on the nation's high school students. The economy now requires a knowledge- and innovation-centered workforce, and as the composition and demands of the American workforce continue to evolve, so too must the American high school.

*This brief will explore how expanding the learning opportunities of high school students—to provide flexibility regarding time, location, and delivery methods as well as opportunities to apply knowledge in real-world situations and access social and academic supports—can be used to change the projected skill and knowledge shortages in the nation's workforce.*

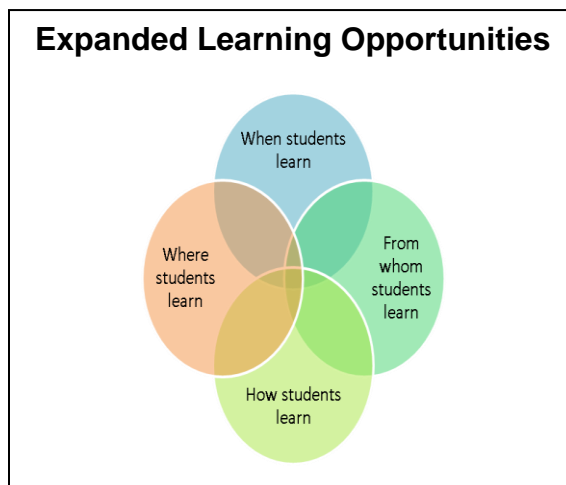
## **Expanding Learning Opportunities for High School Students**

Doing more with less has become a familiar mantra for states and districts. Dwindling budgets have become commonplace in most districts, and the coming year does not look like it will be any better. A recent report from the Center on Education Policy predicts even greater funding cuts in School Year 2011–12 for all types of districts.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these challenges, the need to graduate more high school students ready for college and a career has never been greater. High school graduates earn more than high school dropouts do, and are also more likely to be employed.<sup>6</sup> This trend holds for college graduates as well. The national unemployment rate for four-year college graduates is 4.8 percent, compared to 9.8 percent for high school graduates. It is clear that the secondary-to-postsecondary pipeline is a vital one for the nation’s economic well-being. Graduating students from high school who are ready for the challenges that lay ahead is the crucial first step in the process.

Expanding the learning opportunities that currently exist in most high schools could be an important strategy for schools and districts looking to be more innovative and perhaps even more economical in how they structure and deliver teaching and learning. The idea of “anytime, anyplace” learning has especially strong potential for high school students, whose unique needs and challenges are often best met outside the traditional high school structure.

Expanded learning opportunities can include providing high school students with work-based learning experiences that are known to benefit students later in their careers,<sup>7</sup> technologies that allow students to access the teaching and learning experiences during nontraditional school hours, and personalized learning that is developed based on their unique needs and strengths. It is important to note that expanded learning opportunities -include multiple programs and approaches. Expanded learning opportunities allow schools and districts to take advantage of the many forms of teaching and learning that align with and support rigorous academic standards.



### **Expanded Learning Opportunities: More Options for High School Students**

There are many reasons for schools and districts to consider a range of options that expand on the traditional ideas of quality teaching and learning for high school students. Compared to their younger peers, high school students face unique barriers that can hinder their ability to acquire a high-quality education. For example, a teen mother raising a child will need different supports in terms of when, how, and where her learning takes place than a student who does not face the same challenges. Students who have fallen off track of graduating from high school on time may need a more personalized learning plan and additional supports to earn the credits they need to graduate. Rural high school students, many of whom may not have access to teachers qualified to teach Advanced Placement (AP) or other high-level courses, are at a unique disadvantage compared to students living in more populated areas with a larger teaching pool.<sup>8</sup>



Expanded learning opportunities can also provide those high school students most in need with essential college-readiness experiences. While many middle-class or affluent students have been more exposed to experiences that provide greater exposure to postsecondary opportunities and the workplace, those most left behind by the system have not.<sup>9</sup> Expanded learning opportunities can provide a unique chance to expose low-income students and students of color to role models and experiences at the postsecondary and career levels that bring relevance to and reinforcement of their high school learning experiences.<sup>10</sup>

### **California's Linked Learning Initiative: One Comprehensive Lens to View Expanded Learning Opportunities for High School Students**

California's Linked Learning initiative represents one statewide strategy to provide systematic supports for districts and schools working to prepare high school students for college and career demands. At the school level, students are provided with a college- and career-ready education through the integration of four key components: a rigorous academic core aligned to college expectation; a career and technical education theme in a high-skill, high-pay, and high-growth industry; a work-based learning component; and a supplemental services component. School districts, in turn, align their policies to provide students with a portfolio of options in different high-skill, high-wage, high-growth industries, and the state, through California Assembly Bill 2648, aligns resources and supports at the secondary level to facilitate this effort.

Supported by the James Irvine Foundation, California's Linked Learning initiative supports a more comprehensive approach to expanded learning opportunities. These include the utilization of qualified intermediaries to make connections between traditional schools and their external partners and supplemental services to facilitate a more comprehensive approach to college and career readiness.

**Qualified intermediaries.** The Linked Learning approach makes strong use of qualified intermediaries. These are groups that help build, connect, evaluate, and sustain relationships between in-school and out-of-school entities. Qualified intermediaries often bring expertise from both inside and outside education, and help schools and external partners agree on common language, use of resources, and outcomes to achieve common goals.

**Work-based learning.** Qualified intermediaries often prove especially helpful in facilitating work-based learning. This can include a continuum of experiences ranging from work exposure to job shadowing to intense hands-on learning opportunities such as internships for local employers or service-learning projects for community clients. Work-based learning experiences can give students an opportunity to apply academic concepts in a workplace setting and better understand the relevance of their academic work.

**Block scheduling.** In order to provide more time for work-based learning and facilitate a more interdisciplinary education in general, many schools implementing the Linked Learning approach use block scheduling during the school day. Rather than having a seven- or eight-period day, schools schedule fewer classes that extend for longer periods of time and may alternate classes between days.

**Supplemental services.** All these measures may still not address the needs of students who fall off track on the way to graduation or are unable to take advantage of expanded learning opportunities for other reasons. The fourth component of Linked Learning is supplemental services, which can include targeted academic tutoring after school, transportation to work-based learning experiences, and partnerships with community-based organizations addressing student health and socioemotional needs. Effective application of these supports can help overcome the range of barriers that might prevent high school students from taking advantage of expanded learning opportunities.

For more information, visit [www.connectedcalifornia.org](http://www.connectedcalifornia.org).



Most significantly, the explosion of technology joined with the intense interest and ability of high school students to apply technology to their daily lives also provides schools and districts new opportunities to facilitate teaching and learning that is more responsive to student needs. Technology also allows opportunities to rethink when, where, from whom, and how students learn, a crucial issue in particular for transient students and students in rural areas. In order to remain viable in the twenty-first century, schools and districts must take advantage of these opportunities and plan strategically how to meet the evolving individual and often complex needs of high school students.

### **When students learn**

The challenges of the twenty-first-century global economy are upon us, and policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels have recognized the need for new and innovative approaches to educating high school students to meet current and future workforce demands. While the traditional model of high school (one building, a 6.7-hour school day, daily homework) has worked and continues to work for some students, many more students are underserved by this rigid definition of learning time.

Exploring and testing the boundaries of when and how students learn is not new for policymakers and practitioners. In 1994, the National Commission on Time and Learning roundly criticized the traditional school day and calendar as limiting student learning for reasons that had nothing to do with academics.<sup>11</sup> The advent of new technologies has now pushed this discussion into warp speed, with policymakers, researchers, and for-profit companies all looking toward technology as a way to finally expand the boundaries of not only *when* students learn, but *how* they learn, *where* they learn, and *what* they learn.

Innovative educators have taken advantage of the widespread use and increasing potential of digital and virtual technology to create a number of new innovative high school models that have expanded learning opportunities beyond the confines of the traditional school day. The U.S. Department of Education's National Education Technology Plan lays out "a twenty-first-century model of learning powered by technology" that leverages technology to provide a more personalized system of learning that addresses the unique needs of all students and builds the capacity of educators to teach those students in new and different ways.<sup>12</sup>

These innovations are especially important for schools and districts trying to meet the needs of high school students. In a survey of high school dropouts, 32 percent conveyed that they dropped out because they took a job, 26 percent because they became parents, and 22 percent because they had to help their family; for some, it was a combination of these factors.<sup>a13</sup> Providing students with opportunities to access credit-bearing courses online at times that allow them to work or take care of family matters can help overcome these kinds of practical barriers to staying in high school. Expanding the times at which high school students can access learning can both accommodate the needs of students and allow for a range of options that promote college and career readiness, such as increased time for core academic subjects, more personalized and customized learning, and on-call tutoring services. While many of these strategies hold great promise, expanding the learning opportunities of high school students must be a coordinated effort that supports and aligns with the overall academic goals of the school.

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<sup>a</sup> Respondents could report more than one factor in the survey.



## Where students learn

Providing greater flexibility around *when* learning takes place is often closely linked to greater flexibility regarding *where* learning takes place. Schools and districts implementing innovative expanded learning opportunities are supporting student learning that takes place beyond the four walls of the school building. For high school students, such learning can take place on college campuses, through specific on-the-job experiences, in the community, and via technology at home or within other public spaces. There are many potential benefits to such flexibility. Allowing student learning to take place on college campuses or in the workplace can expand student motivation, provide a deeper understanding of how high school academics connect to postsecondary and workforce demands, and enable students to potentially gain postsecondary credits while they are in high school.<sup>14</sup>

### Big Picture Learning

The Big Picture Model primarily targets students who may not have succeeded in a traditional high school. With more than sixty schools operating nationwide, Big Picture requires students to plan their personalized education program with their families and stretches the traditional school day by providing opportunities for internships two days per week. The use of technology and community resources provides many opportunities to engage students and personalize the learning experience beyond the school day into what may typically be considered information learning time. Big Picture recognizes and supports that learning can take place anytime and anywhere and integrates various approaches to acquiring and reinforcing knowledge, taking advantage of learning opportunities before and after school, at home, and within the community.

In some ways, high school students are ideally suited to take advantage of these kinds of flexibilities. Many adolescents can facilitate their own transportation between locations,<sup>15</sup> and their familiarity with technology can provide greater flexibility on where learning can take place. Still, expanded learning opportunities that take place in different locations outside of school do require significant planning and coordination on the part of schools and districts. It is imperative that there be a strategy in place for the coherent integration of learning experiences across different locations.

## From whom students learn

Changing the traditional structure of when and where students learn will often require districts and schools to think beyond the traditional ideas of who is facilitating learning. While the student-teacher relationship remains an essential element of how students learn, classroom learning can be reinforced and expanded by outside experts and mentors: students' peers, community members, employers, and businesses. As high school students prepare themselves to make the transition from adolescence into adulthood, they can benefit greatly from opportunities to engage with adults whose work or personal experiences can support learning.<sup>16</sup> Research shows that relationships that supplement the student-teacher interaction can give students a clearer understanding of labor market expectations and the role of education in helping them achieve their aspirations.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, schools serving primarily low-income populations, students of color, or rural areas provide their students disproportionately less access to AP and other college-preparatory course offerings.<sup>18</sup> To overcome these access shortfalls, many high schools and districts are now providing their students access to college- and career-preparatory course work through virtual technology that allows teachers and experts in other schools, districts, and even states to teach their students.



Even in light of these benefits, schools and districts must also honestly contend with possible risks inherent in this flexibility. For example, regulating and coordinating teacher lessons and activities is easier than similarly channeling business partners, postsecondary faculty members, or community partners. Schools and districts should ensure that external partners are carefully vetted for the appropriate expertise to teach students as well as to ensure student safety. It is also essential that lessons are reinforcing high academic standards and that students are matched with an external partner best suited to meeting the particular student's learning needs. Coordinating the use of external partners on a long-term and widespread basis can be very challenging, and success will depend on schools and districts providing staff with the appropriate training and support.

Many schools and districts contract with qualified intermediaries with demonstrated expertise in building, connecting, and sustaining relationships between schools and external partners. Qualified intermediaries can help stakeholders establish common expectations, metrics, and strategies to maximize results and minimize problems.<sup>19</sup> A comprehensive system that takes advantage of external partnerships takes time to develop; intermediaries can ease the transition and help build a system that has a positive impact on student learning and dropout rates.

Unite LA is an example of a qualified intermediary that successfully brings together secondary school stakeholders and postsecondary education, business, and community groups. Initiated by the Los Angeles (LA) Chamber of Commerce, Unite LA helps these groups speak a common language about improvement so they can develop common expectations and leverage resources to support the city's high schools. Unite LA implements projects such as the College and Career Success Network, a broad team of education and business partners that work collaboratively to advance secondary reform by supporting the conversion of large high schools to small schools and small learning communities (SLCs). This network benefits nine Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) high school complexes and more than 400 small schools and SLCs operating across the district. Unite LA also implements PILLAR, a collaborative partnership with LAUSD and the LA Chamber that works to develop better business partnerships to benefit local schools and students, and acts as convener of the LA Compact, a collaboration between eighteen major Los Angeles institutions that have made a commitment to work jointly through eight strategies to ensure that all Los Angeles youths graduate from high school and have access to college and career pathways.

## **How students learn**

The traditional delivery method in education is still largely dominated by teachers conveying knowledge to students through textbooks and assessing student learning with classroom-administered tests. Because this style of learning is no longer aligned to the workforce demands of the twenty-first-century economy, American students often leave high school unprepared for the immediate challenges they face in college and the workplace.<sup>20</sup> Business and postsecondary institutions are calling for individuals who can demonstrate and apply their knowledge in creative and evolving ways.<sup>21</sup> Providing students with age-appropriate opportunities to apply their learning to real-life situations through service learning, work-based learning, project-based learning, and other applied learning opportunities can help expand student competencies in ways that align with workforce demands. Additionally, high school students feel more engaged and connected to what they are learning when they see the relevance of their work beyond high school.<sup>22</sup> The 2006 report *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts* shows that nearly half of high school dropouts said they left high school because classes were not engaging them.<sup>23</sup> By involving high school students in more interesting, inquiry-led work that has relevance to their daily life, the nation could see significant improvements in



graduation rates, achievement, and other important academic outcomes<sup>24</sup> (see “National Academy Foundation,” box below).<sup>25</sup>

### **National Academy Foundation**

The National Academy Foundation (NAF) is an organization that combines industry-focused curricula, work-based learning experiences, and business partner expertise, resulting in more than 90 percent of NAF students graduating from high school and four out of five going on to postsecondary education. As part of the work-based learning experiences NAF provides, for example, juniors and seniors at the Monticello High School Academy of Finance in New York run a tax clinic to prepare returns for low-income residents. Students spend classroom time learning about the tax code and how to prepare 1040 forms, and become certified tax preparers through the IRS’s Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program. The work-based learning experience gives students the opportunity to apply their learning and provide a valuable community service directly to a clientele base. Last year, students from NAF academies operated fourteen different tax clinics nationwide, preparing more than 1,700 returns that yielded refunds of more than \$5 million to community residents.

Surveys of postsecondary faculty also demonstrate a serious disconnect between what postsecondary educators expect students to know and do and how secondary schools are preparing their students.<sup>26</sup> These surveys emphasize the need for students at the postsecondary level to know fewer subjects but in greater detail. Critical analysis and strong communication skills are also important factors for success at the postsecondary level. While the widespread adoption of the common core state standards in English language arts and mathematics represents an important step in ensuring that all students leave high school ready for success in college and a career, simply increasing rigor will not yield more prepared graduates.<sup>27</sup> High school students must also have opportunities to apply their knowledge in real-world situations and develop complex and critical thinking skills needed in both college and the workplace. High school students can also benefit from interacting with experts and mentors who can provide additional supports that contribute to college and career readiness such as communication skills, project management, and the ability to work in teams.<sup>28</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Expanded learning opportunities can create a range of options for schools and districts as they seek to graduate more students ready for the challenges of college and a career. The concerns and needs of high school students are unique, and the demands they will face in a postsecondary environment and within the workplace have evolved enormously in the last twenty years. In addition, there are many students who are no longer on track to graduate from high school. Clearly, schools and districts face enormous challenges as they try to improve the outcomes for high school students. By bringing flexibility and innovation to the traditional concepts of when and where teaching and learning takes place and who is involved in the process, schools and districts have the potential to create innovative and comprehensive strategies that meet the academic and social needs of today’s high school students.

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## Endnotes

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