



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Fact Sheet: Bolstering Student Attendance, Engagement, and Success Through Career-Connected Learning

Career-connected learning is an educational strategy that combines high-quality academic instruction, skill-based learning, and real-world experiences to prepare students with the knowledge and skills that they need to pursue their college and career goals. Career-connected learning can be delivered in a variety of ways, including in core content classes, through career and technical education (CTE) programs, in partnership with community and technical colleges, and through work-based learning experiences like job fairs, job shadows, internships, pre-apprenticeships, and registered apprenticeship programs. *All* students can benefit from having a rigorous, well-rounded education that is career-connected, community-engaged, and student-centered. **A growing body of evidence indicates that participation in career-connected learning can promote strong attendance, engagement, and academic achievement** by helping students forge direct and durable linkages between what they learn in school and their personal and professional interests and aspirations for their futures. For example:

- In [California](#), a 3-year analysis of three high schools implementing Linked Learning—an educational model that combines rigorous academics, high-quality career and technical education, real-world experience, and integrated student supports—found that participating students had higher attendance rates than their peers. Additionally, an independent [study](#) found that students who participated in Linked Learning were more likely to graduate from high school and earned more credits on average. Students participating in Linked Learning were more likely than peers to report that they received guidance from adults regarding postsecondary education planning and that their career pathway experiences helped them develop skills needed for success after high school, including confidence, organizational skills, and professionalism.
- In the [District of Columbia Public Schools](#), high school students enrolled in CTE courses during the 2022–23 school year attended nearly 13 more days of school than peers who did not. [Nationally](#), the average 4-year graduation rate for the 2021–22 school year for CTE concentrators, (i.e., students who take two or more courses in a CTE program or program of study) is 96 percent—11 percentage points higher than the average rate for all students.
- A [national](#), multi-year independent study of 16 school districts participating in the Youth CareerConnect program—a high school-based program that included employer partnerships and engagement, integrated academic and career curricula, work-based learning, and individualized career and academic counseling—found that the program led to gains in student attendance and credit accumulation, particularly for students who participated in an internship, had a mentor, or completed an individualized education and career development plan.
- In [New York City](#), a multi-year study of 37 high schools found that students in CTE-dedicated high schools had higher attendance and were consistently more likely to be on track for a Regents diploma.

- In [North Carolina](#), high school students who participated in a CTE dual enrollment program were six times more likely to earn college credits while in high school, twice as likely to graduate high school, and were more likely to enroll in college than peers by nine percentage points.
- In [New Hampshire](#), a 2023 Gallup poll surveying over 9,600 students in grades 5 through 12 found that students who participated in career-connected learning were more likely to be involved in and enthusiastic about school, (i.e., engagement) and to have positive ideas and energy for the future (i.e., hope).

Career-connected learning can help drive positive results by supporting students to feel purposeful, competent, and valued in their school and community, and thereby reinforce their motivation and engagement.

Unlocking Career Success

[Unlocking Career Success](#) is an interagency initiative that reimagines how our nation’s high schools prepare all students to thrive in their future education and careers. The initiative blurs the lines between high school, college, and career, providing students with accelerated and innovative opportunities to earn college credits and gain real-world career experiences. This joint effort across the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Commerce supports public and private sector leaders, government agencies, and other community-based organizations to help students earn postsecondary degrees and industry-recognized credentials that our employers need and our economy demands. Unlocking Career Success seeks to strengthen systems of multiple pathways to success, fulfilling the promise of education as the key to economic and social mobility, and providing our students with rewarding, joyful, purposeful college and career pathways that lead them to reach their endless potential.

Schools, community-based organizations, and business and industry can increase student attendance, engagement, and academic achievement through career-connected learning to [Raise the Bar](#) for student success by taking steps to:

1. Support self and career exploration and student reflection.

Career-connected learning can enable and inspire students to start figuring out what they want to become early on and motivate them to work hard towards a career path. For example, [Cajon Valley Union School District](#) engages elementary school students in a career development framework called “The Mission of Me” that includes three core pillars: self-awareness, journey, and personal story. Students engage in 54 career exploration units of study across grades K-8. After engaging in projects and meeting industry professionals, students reflect on their strengths, interests, and values and how they line up with the possible future. Chronic absenteeism rates decreased by 3 percentage points between school year (SY) 2021–22 and SY 2022–23.¹

Educators can use resources, such as [Career Conversation Starters](#), developed by the American School Counselor Association, to help guide career conversations with students and parents.

2. Incorporate ongoing opportunities for students to tackle real-world challenges that are personally meaningful and connect them to their learning.

¹ Data from the California Department of Education, retrieved from <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/AttAbsByRsn.aspx?aggllevel=District&cde=37679910000000&year=2022-23>

When students apply what they learn to design solutions to real-world problems, it supports knowledge and skill development and can build their confidence and motivation to persevere through difficult problems in the future.²

For example, [Oakland Unified School District](#) engages students through [Y-PLAN](#), an instructional approach that supports students to engage in youth participatory action research to tackle real-world challenges through partnerships with local industries and public agencies. For example, students from multiple high schools worked with Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) and AC Transit to develop and implement solutions intended to increase improve riders' public transit experience, as well as transit usability and safety. Research indicates that youth participatory action research can significantly improve students' attendance rates.³

There are several resources available to support districts and schools. [SkillsUSA](#)—a Career and Technical Student Organization (CTSO) that serves approximately 400,000 middle school, high school, and college students and teachers throughout the country—keeps students motivated and engaged through hands-on learning aligned to rigorous academic standards and current industry standards in more than 130 occupational areas. According to the Student Research Foundation, SkillsUSA students were more likely than peers to report being excited about school and able to connect their learning to the real world.⁴ SkillsUSA produced a [docuseries](#) to showcase the high-quality CTE experiences of five SkillsUSA students and their career advisors.

Additionally, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities at Stanford University offers an illustrative [guide](#) of how teachers partner with industry and community to deliver comprehensive student supports that “link together” a rigorous academic curriculum, technical education, and workplace opportunities into a coherent and engaging learning experience. [EvolveMe](#), developed by American Student Assistance, is a free online platform to discover internship programs for high school students. [Apprenticeship Finder](#), developed by the U.S. Department of Labor, is a free searchable database that includes information on thousands of active apprenticeship programs across the country serving many industries, occupations, and geographic locations.

3. Continuously cultivate students' relationships and social capital.

Developing students' relationships with caring adults who serve as mentors and network-builders can help open up gateways to career opportunities for young people.

For example, [Providence, Rhode Island Pathways in Technology Early College High \(P-TECH\)](#), housed in the Providence Career and Technical Academy, works with Tech Collective, an industry alliance for high tech companies, to create connections between students and potential employers. Each incoming freshman in the program gets matched with someone in the industry. Chronic absenteeism rates at Providence Career and Technical Academy decreased by 9 percentage points between SY 2022–23 and SY 2023–24.⁵

² Moore, David. (2010). Forms and issues in experiential learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. 2010. 3 - 13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.415>

³ Voight, A., & Velez, V. (2018). Youth Participatory Action Research in the High School Curriculum: Education Outcomes for Student Participants in a District-Wide Initiative. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 11(3), 433–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2018.1431345>

⁴ Student Research Foundation (2022). *The SkillsUSA Advantage: How SkillsUSA Is Making Career and Technical Education Work Even Better*. <https://www.skillsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SkillsUSAAdvantage-Full-Report.pdf>

⁵ Data from the Rhode Island Department of Education SY 2023–24 Student Attendance Leader Board <https://www3.ride.ri.gov/attendance/public>

[Big Picture Learning](#)—a network of approximately 65 schools in 26 states—operate a Learning Through Interest internship program that provides students access to adults with similar interests to learn from and connect with in a work environment where they use their knowledge in real-world settings. Alumni reported that their relationships and experiences helped them learn how to navigate the world of work and become comfortable and confident at work. Overall, 96 percent of alumni reported they were in touch with their high school advisors 2 years or more after graduation.

Mentorships are a key component of this work and in increasing student connection to school. The National Partnership for Student Success (NPSS)—a public private-partnership led by the U.S. Department of Education, AmeriCorps, and the Johns Hopkins Everyone Graduates Center—developed this [toolkit](#) for districts, schools, and community-based organizations to create partnerships with industry and business in support of students' education and career goals through roles like mentoring and coaching. With the aim of helping educators and employers to build students' professional networks, the Christensen Institute published this [report](#) highlighting field-tested strategies for building students' social capital within existing career pathways initiatives.

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