

Oakland Unified School District



114
schools

34,800+
students

Vision

All OUSD students will find joy in their academic experience while graduating with the skills to ensure they are caring, competent, fully-informed, critical thinkers who are prepared for college, career, and community success.

Mission

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) will build a Full Service Community School District focused on high academic achievement while serving the whole child, eliminating inequities, and providing each child with excellent teachers, every day.

Background

The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is located in the culturally rich and diverse community of Oakland, California. The district serves 34,854 students, 80% of whom qualify for free and reduced price meals (FRPM), with wide variation across the district from 24% in some elementary schools to 100% in some alternative high schools.¹ This profile focuses on the Linked Learning work in the district's 16 high schools that range in size from 58 students at an alternative high school to 1,812 students at a comprehensive high school. Ninety-two percent of students in grades 10 through 12 in Oakland high schools are enrolled in a Career Pathway.

¹ CDE Dataquest, 2025-26

Interviews

This profile is based on interviews with staff in the district office and at one school site:

Shanti Elliott, Pathway Coach, Skyline High School

Claire Fisher, Executive Director, Secondary Instruction

Lizzie Humphries, Coordinator, Literacy, Linked Learning Office

Rebecca Lacocque, Linked Learning Director

Strategies for Coherence

Linked Learning motivates and engages students by situating learning within a college and career pathway they have chosen. "By blending theoretical knowledge with real-world application, OUSD Pathways result in relevant and rigorous personalized educational experiences that inspire students and prepare them for college, career, and community."² Academic content is not separate from Pathway learning but infused into it, alongside other skills and competencies needed for success. In a Pathway focused on Community Health and Education, students develop reading, writing, math, and science skills while researching health inequities and education policy - applying these content areas to community improvement projects and building public speaking, organizing, and leadership skills along the way.

This profile is about OUSD's efforts to reach this vision by strengthening the consistency and alignment of academic content with the instructional practices in the district's Linked Learning Pathways. Three years ago, at a Carnegie Foundation training on improvement science, OUSD staff identified the lack of coherence between Pathways and high school academic programs as their problem of practice. While still a work in progress, staff are implementing three key strategies and practices to create greater coherence at the district and school site:



Focused Priorities

- (1) Using the district Strategic Plan and Graduate Profile to guide decision-making
- (2) Defining and pursuing common priorities for instructional improvement



Capacity Building

- (3) Strengthening Instructional Leadership Teams to build instructional capacity and coherence across a school site

² www.ousd.org



1. Using the district Strategic Plan and Graduate Profile to guide decision-making

This looks like...

- Staying focused on priorities defined through the Strategic Plan and performance indicators
- Using the Graduate Profile to collaborate and make decisions together

At the district level, OUSD staff are using the district's **Strategic Plan** and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as the basis for promising cross-departmental collaboration. The Strategic Plan has not sat on a shelf. Instead it evolves every year, under consistent focal areas, and is used by staff in different departments to co-create annual KPIs. The KPIs set specific outcomes for three focus areas: Post-Secondary Readiness, Systems of Personalized Support, and Rigorous and Relevant Learning. Rebecca Lacocque, Linked Learning Director, notes that these KPIs have helped staff across departments - Linked Learning, Special Education, Community Schools—use shared language and get clearer about what student success looks like.

Similarly, OUSD's **Graduate Profile** is a living document at Skyline High School and a useful tool for helping Pathway and academic content teachers collaborate around competencies. Shanti Elliott, Pathway Coach at Skyline, explains that the Graduate Profile defines the competencies that both Pathway teachers and academic content teachers are working towards. It prompts conversation about how to integrate critical thinking, for example, into the Arts, Entertainment and Design Pathway. As staff work together to define student outcomes, the Graduate Profile serves as a helpful starting point.

2. Defining and pursuing common priorities for instructional improvement

This looks like...

- Choosing a districtwide focus for instructional practice that prompts collaboration
- Using culminating projects to see the integrated nature of student learning and to identify areas for continued improvement

Each year, the Linked Learning Office and the Academics Department choose an **area of focus for instructional practice**. Last year, the focus was on “student-to-student discourse” or “Student Talk” with the recognition that learning is a cultural and social process. At Skyline High, in both Pathway collaboration spaces and in academic department meetings, teachers worked together to define the specific strategies they would use to promote Student Talk. This work started with better understanding each other’s approach - for example, the use of project-based learning to increase Student Talk. Skyline High received the highest rating for improvement in Student Talk in the district. Shanti Elliott attributes this success to the principal’s leadership, strong instructional coaches and a schoolwide emphasis on collaborative processes and public learning.

This year, the focus is on “Scaffolding for Rigor” based on Zaretta Hammond’s *Ready for Rigor* framework. This focus comes from student feedback that OUSD is not holding high enough expectations for their work. “Scaffolding for Rigor” is sparking conversations between Pathway leaders and instructional coaches about the types of professional learning that staff need and the alignment of Professional Learning Community (PLC) content. As a foundation for decision-making, they started by looking at and talking about student work and by identifying shared student outcomes. As with Student Talk, these conversations are creating spaces for Pathway and academic content teachers to share practices and learn from each other.

Districtwide, the **Capstone Project** - a multi-faceted culminating project through which students demonstrate their cumulative knowledge and skills - has created opportunities for collaboration across Pathways and academics. From the OUSD website page on Capstones, “Adult collaboration is the backbone for building instructional coherence and supporting student success. If we collaborate towards a shared vision for OUSD students, then we see improved student outcomes and increased teacher retention.”³ At Skyline High, for example, the teachers have developed common deadlines, resources and expectations across the Pathways, creating a unified and equitable experience for students. Increasingly, teachers across all content areas are working together to grade the Capstones, which has allowed them to see the overlapping Pathway and academic skills that students demonstrate and also understand the skill gaps that they could be working together to fill.

³ [OUSD Capstone Project webpage](#)



3. Strengthening Instructional Leadership Teams to build instructional capacity and coherence across a school site

This looks like...

- Creating a shared goal that guides collaborative work
- Intentionally building the leadership skills of ILT members
- Modeling the processes and experiences that will be replicated across the district

To improve instruction and create a space for collaboration, OUSD has invested in building school site Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) that work together to develop and facilitate professional learning and coaching. At Skyline High School, the ILT includes Pathway directors, department directors, and other staff involved in professional development, all co-creating professional learning experiences for the full staff. The shared goals across ILT members are to ensure that **all students are experiencing consistently positive learning experiences and that they are deeply connected to their own learning process**. Reaching these goals requires creating consistent classroom rituals and routines and making learning explicit and transparent based on whole child practices.

ILT members receive **extensive leadership training and support** across the year. The 16 high school ILTs come together for two ILT Summits each year and have a large bank of resources in the [ILT Playbook](#) that they can access when needed. This year, the launch meeting opened with a student panel in which students shared what it feels like to learn in OUSD. Staff heard that students can tell when teachers hold high expectations, that they want adult support (but in ways that feel genuinely supportive), and that some classes are so easy students don't feel compelled to attend. The panel set the stage for ILT members to put students and their learning experiences at the center of their work.

The districtwide ILT trainings are intentionally designed to **model the processes and experiences that ILTs are expected to replicate at their sites**. During trainings, ILT members practice shared decision-making by looking at data, discussing options and voting on their areas of focus. This participatory process is essential in Oakland, where school sites have significant autonomy over how they operate. The trainings also create learning environments grounded in professional respect, psychological safety, and a sense of partnership - and prompt ILT members to connect those experiences to what students should feel in their own schools and classrooms.

Challenges

■ **Integrating Linked Learning Pathways and academics is moving forward despite challenging conditions.** In OUSD's culture, finding the right balance between autonomy and collective action is an ongoing process. Teachers guard their hard-earned independence to decide what happens in their classrooms, and Pathway teachers in particular are accustomed to flexibility and creativity in developing curriculum. While people understand the importance of coherence, working collaboratively is hard. The adoption of new curriculum adds difficulty, since integrating externally-set curriculum can feel constraining, especially when some teachers are uncertain about its value.

■ **Teacher contract restrictions add a further challenge.** Requirements to attend professional development are loosely enforced, and adopting changes requires individual outreach to win teachers' buy-in. District staff work with the "coalition of the willing," moving forward with the understanding that collaborative work cannot be mandated from the top down - it needs to grow from the bright spots.

Impacts

At the district level, the consistency of the Strategic Plan has allowed staff to stay focused on how their work impacts students. Across departments, there is better teaming with more shared understanding of what different people are doing and how they are supporting student learning. Staff have stronger relationships and are better able to see that their underlying philosophies are more aligned than they may have thought.

At school sites, teachers benefit from a culture of collaboration. They are planning together, visiting each other's classrooms, and reviewing each other's work. Teachers pick up practices from one another - including classroom routines - which is creating more consistency across classrooms and in expectations of students. Students can see this consistency in content and practice, which makes them feel more respected and more in control of their own learning.