

## Linking courses to careers improves grad rates

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When Cynthia Gutierrez arrived four years ago at Skyline High School in Oakland, she was neither an academic superstar nor someone who struggled with school. Like most kids, she says, she was "somewhere in the middle." Bored with her classes, she'd left behind a trail of C's and D's, and with some bad luck, she might have even lost interest in school altogether. "I didn't know what I was doing," she says.

Instead, Gutierrez had a stroke of good fortune. During her freshman year, a teacher told her about Skyline's education academy, a small school within the school centered around careers in education. When she heard the program included regular field trips, she signed up. Gutierrez and 25 of her classmates spent the next three years taking classes together on education-related topics like child development and how people learn, combining a rigorous college-prep curriculum with student-teaching trips to local elementary schools. In the close-knit environment of the academy, Gutierrez found new motivation, and she discovered a love of teaching.

"Before, I couldn't really connect with my teachers all that well," she says. "But in the academy, it was different." Gutierrez's grades improved, even with a more demanding course load that qualified her for admission to the state university system. Her teachers say she blossomed into a leader. And in June, she earned something that far too many of California's young people do not: a high school diploma.

Students like Gutierrez are far from the exception in California's public schools, but they aren't nearly as much of the rule as California needs. Over the past 10 years, while graduation rates at high schools across the country have been climbing, many of California's high schools have gotten worse. One out of 3 students in our state still doesn't graduate from high school, severely limiting career options - and sending negative consequences rippling across the state's economy. Barely a third of those who do, meanwhile, are considered "college ready." For students of color and those from low-income households, these numbers are even worse, but for years, education experts have been struggling to find a way to close this widening achievement gap.

While state standards for high school education are rigorous, and rightly so, too many students remain unmotivated and disengaged. After years of disagreement, however, there is a growing consensus around how we can finally tackle this problem - and make sure more of our kids are prepared for success both in college and in their careers.

When Gutierrez entered Skyline's education academy three years ago, she joined thousands of students across California in a promising educational approach called Linked Learning. This sweeping high school reform effort, which the state's superintendent of public instruction has called "one of the most promising high school transformation strategies we've seen in decades," allows teachers to change the way core academics are taught by combining classroom learning with real-world, work-based experience. The idea behind Linked Learning is simple: To make it easier for students to stay engaged, they need to be more motivated. Their coursework has to be relevant - or "linked" - to their aspirations. Those all-important figures standing in the front of classrooms, in other words, have to be able to answer the age-old question: "Why does this matter to me?"

Linked Learning does this by making what goes on in the classroom more relevant. At Skyline, every 10th-grader gets to choose from seven different career-themed programs - from performing arts to architecture and graphic design - where they spend the next three years combining out-of-school internships in their academy field with a rigorous academic core, taught through the lens of their industry theme, that qualifies every student for college.

Teachers, who prepare all of their students to become both college- and career-ready, are trained to incorporate this work-based experience into the classroom, and vice versa. In Skyline's architecture academy, for example, algebra and physics teachers show their students how the formulas they're learning are used in real-world projects like building bridges or designing buildings. In the school's education academy, Gutierrez found again and again that what she was reading in her textbooks suddenly made sense when she tried to explain it to a class of fifth-graders.

When their schoolwork comes to life, students perk up, stay engaged - and graduate. Over the past few years, Linked Learning has been put into practice in hundreds of schools across the state. With the help of \$16 million in grants from the Irvine Foundation, nine school districts, including districts in Oakland, West Contra Costa County and Antioch, are transforming their high schools to make Linked Learning available to any of their students. The results speak for themselves: Attendance rates are up, dropout rates are down, and student test scores are climbing in these schools. Every one of Gutierrez's classmates in Skyline's education academy graduated.

This success is not going unnoticed. At a time when education issues tend to spark more disagreement than collaboration, this approach has brought together an unlikely coalition of teachers, businesses, community groups, colleges and policymakers to bring it to even more of California's high schools. In May, the California Department of Education also threw its support behind Linked Learning, recommending that the program's focus on college and career readiness, in particular, be adopted by every public school in California.

Expanding this approach statewide should be at the top of our agenda, so we can give more students a chance to experience what Gutierrez did. She will be attending Oakland's Laney College in the fall and hopes to transfer in two years to a California State University, where she plans to graduate with a teaching credential. "What the academy taught me is that if you set your mind to do something, you can do it," she says. "In four years, I'm going to be a teacher."

Gutierrez is holding up her end of the bargain. We need to hold up ours, by providing more of California's youth with strong academics, demanding technical learning and the real-world experience that prepares them for success in college and careers - and life. The future of our state depends upon it, and California's youth deserve no less.

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Cynthia Gutierrez, a graduate of Skyline High School's Linked Learning program, works with a grade school student on a project. She will be attending college this year and plans to graduate with a teaching credential.