

Innovating Work-Based Learning in Oakland: Strategies to Promote Internship Quality

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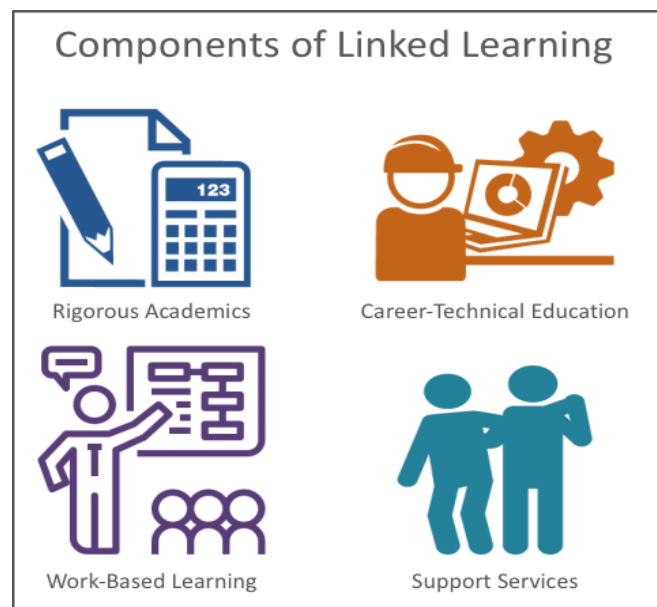
ISSUE

In 2015, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) outlined the Pathway to Excellence, an ambitious five-year strategic plan to ensure that students graduate with skills they need to thrive in college and their careers. A central part of this plan is Linked Learning, an approach to education that makes students' academic experiences more relevant and engaging by allowing them to apply their coursework in real-world settings. OUSD has committed to increasing the percentage of high school students engaged in Linked Learning pathways from 37% in 2014 to 80% by 2020.

One of the core components of Linked Learning is work-based learning. While work-based learning consists of a continuum of activities spanning from career awareness to career training, internships are the capstone of this continuum for many students. Internships enable students to learn through work by applying their classroom learning in professional settings. In doing so, students gain exposure to career opportunities and greater context for their academic experiences.

As the district scales Linked Learning, it must expand internships while maintaining program quality. Our project focused on this challenge. In particular, we asked:

1. *What makes an internship high quality?*
2. *How can OUSD maintain internship quality as the district rapidly scales the Linked Learning model?*




METHODS

- **Literature review:** We examined reports from the Linked Learning Alliance, ConnectEd, Irvine Foundation, National Academy Foundation, and other thought leaders.
- **Internal landscape analysis:** We interviewed 13 OUSD district and school-based staff and 5 internship sites, and we reviewed a student survey administered by OUSD (N=135).
- **External landscape analysis:** We interviewed staff at 6 California school districts and 1 independent charter school.

- FINDINGS**
- **Internship quality indicators:** Our interviews revealed many characteristics of high-quality internships. Some of the indicators we heard most often were employer mentorship, exposure to new careers, and ownership of an independent project.
 - **Barriers to scaling quality internships:** We identified three distinct challenges that districts commonly encounter when expanding internship programs: (1) reaching a shared definition of internship quality, (2) accommodating students’ diverse needs and interests, and (3) promoting a culture that prioritizes work-based learning across all roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Adopt a rubric that establishes internship quality standards across district**
As OUSD scales its internship programs, a quality rubric would allow district administrators to maintain consistent standards across participating schools, target resources toward program improvement, and set expectations with students and employers. The PLUS Fellows customized a rubric for OUSD that evaluates internships according to eight categories of criteria identified through stakeholder interviews and literature review.

Categories of Internship Quality Indicators From Rubric Created for OUSD	
 <p>Student Experience</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internship Preparation 2. Activities and Responsibilities 3. Career Development 4. Performance Evaluation 	 <p>Program Administration</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Internship Design 6. School Support 7. Employer Partnerships 8. Program Assessment

- **Collect student perspectives to further refine quality metrics**
The main objectives of internship programs—including promoting career readiness and improving academic outcomes—are student-centered. Accordingly, further research on internship quality should include student focus groups to collect in-depth feedback on how programs can best support their learning and growth.
- **Promote schoolwide staff engagement in work-based learning**
Many schools rely on one individual or a small team to coordinate internship programs. To fully align internships with pathways, staff in all roles—especially teachers—should also be engaged. To broaden engagement, districts can expand communities of practice, offer relevant professional development, and facilitate in-school work-based learning.