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Making learning matter can spell success in San Bernardino

Dale Marsden and Michael J. Gallo Sep 27, 2018

Here's a pointed question posed by generations of students: Why do I need to know this?

Young people are usually told to imagine a distant future where coursework could matter to their job.

That question is disappearing in San Bernardino City Unified School District.

Thanks to an innovative approach that connects employers and educators, students don't have to wait for "someday" to apply academics to real-world work, or guess how time in class might lead to a fulfilling career.

The approach, called Linked Learning, makes school relevant to youth and area employers.

Students select from 34 pathways connected to local industry, choosing fields such as logistics, transportation, advanced manufacturing, agricultural technology and medicine.

Each pathway integrates strong academics, based on admission for California's public universities, with technical education matched to its industry theme.

Learning is brought to life as students spend time in actual workplaces with companies ranging from Amazon and Garner Holt Productions to Peppertree Distributors and Premier Medical Transportation — and even within the school district's operational departments.

The County of San Bernardino's Generation Go! also provides work-based learning for high school students, starting with a pilot project at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center.

Through internships and projects supervised by area employers, young people see professional possibilities they could not picture by themselves.

They get inspired to find their place in our 21st-century economy, gain knowledge and skills to make it happen and grow confidence to succeed in high school, college and career.

Consider Charlie Calderon, who fell in love with fixing cars at 13 and pursued that passion in the diesel mechanics pathway, a collaboration involving Pacific High School and San Bernardino Valley College.

This pathway feeds our thriving transportation sector and many students have a job offer in hand before graduation.

In high school, Charlie completed most courses needed for a diesel truck technology certificate; with that certificate he can earn \$67,500 after just two years on the job.

Moreover, he stands ready to pursue other postsecondary goals, including a college degree, while he advances his career.

Charlie is part of the story of educational, economic, and community renewal in San Bernardino. This transformation was sparked when people from all neighborhoods and sectors came together in 2012 to talk about our future.

They confronted the skills gap that results in unemployment or low-wage job placements, and recognized that our economy depends on more students earning postsecondary degrees and industry-recognized certifications.

They declared that every young person in San Bernardino, including special needs students, should be fully prepared to succeed in sectors that drive growth.

Their voices and vision are behind the progress in our schools, where the graduation rate has climbed from 67 to 89 percent. San Bernardino City Unified School District, the 10th largest in California, serving a high percentage of students from low-income households, now outpaces county, state, and national averages for graduation.

The results will only get better as Linked Learning expands.

Research shows that this approach increases graduation rates and credits earned in high school, and is especially effective for young people entering ninth grade with low prior academic achievement.

The district is now infusing elements of Linked Learning in middle and elementary schools, introducing students to career opportunities and putting classroom learning into action through labs sponsored by local partners.

Today, 6,809 of our students are in Linked Learning, about 53 percent of our high school population. We are calling for more employers to offer internships or other job-based experiences.

Together, we can bring Linked Learning to scale — igniting career passions and creating a next-generation workforce with the skills and desire to carry our economy forward.

Will you join us to make learning matter for all young people in San Bernardino?

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