

LEARNING IN THE REAL WORLD: REDESIGNING FOR RELEVANCE AT ARROYO VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

Arroyo Valley High School shows how a large comprehensive high school can give students meaningful learning opportunities anchored in authentic industry experiences. Its wall-to-wall Linked Learning model organizes nearly 2,600 students into industry-themed pathways, connecting academic and technical learning through projects ranging from historical research using mapping software to solar panel installation. Every pathway includes courses carrying college credit through articulation or dual enrollment. School and district structures sustain this learning. A master schedule keeps pathway cohorts together for four years, designated Mondays provide pathway planning time, and a district-funded program specialist aligns courses and brokers partnerships. San Bernardino City Unified supports the work through a merged academic and career technical education office, braided funding, and common criteria for labor market demand, enrollment, and completion. Arroyo Valley's graduation rate rose from 94% in 2021–22 to 96% in 2024–25. That year, 59% of graduates were classified as prepared on California's College/Career Indicator; both measures exceeded district and state rates.



Every Wednesday on the Arroyo Valley High School campus, students can be seen in their pathway shirts, a weekly tradition the school calls Academy Days. Charter buses pull in and out, carrying pathway groups to field experiences. In an on-campus workspace, AniVation students repair Chromebooks for the district, while CORE students head out to help install solar panels with a local nonprofit. By organizing a campus of more than 2,500 students around industry-themed pathways, Arroyo Valley gives students a smaller community to belong to and a clearer view of how their learning connects to the world beyond school.

Arroyo Valley's story is, at its core, about scale, what it takes to give every student on a large comprehensive campus a place to belong and a reason to show up, and how much of that depends on the systems the school and district have built over more than a decade. The school has organized itself into a wall-to-wall set of industry-themed Linked Learning pathways, where students remain with a small community of peers and a shared group of teachers. Supported by a district-wide commitment to what San Bernardino City Unified School District (San Bernardino City Unified) calls purposeful pathways, Arroyo Valley has aligned its pathways with expanded dual enrollment, an on-campus early college program, partnerships with employers and universities, and a growing set of wellness and academic supports. At the district level, San Bernardino has also streamlined its pathway system, using common criteria for labor market demand, enrollment, and completion to assess each pathway's strength. Through that review, the district reduced its pathways from roughly 55 to 45, consolidating or phasing out those that fell short.

Arroyo Valley sits on San Bernardino's west side and serves 2,589 students, making it one of the district's largest high schools. About 94% of students identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, compared with 82% districtwide. Three-quarters of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 15% are English learners, compared with 73% and 20%, respectively, districtwide. The school also serves a higher share of students experiencing homelessness (13%) than the district as a whole (11%) (see Table 1).

Today, Arroyo Valley offers eight pathways, five of which hold Linked Learning Gold certification (see Table 2). The school also hosts an International Baccalaureate (IB) program within the Global Leadership Academy.

Table 1: Demographics for Arroyo Valley High School and San Bernardino City Unified School District, 2025–26

Demographic Group	Arroyo Valley High School	San Bernardino City Unified School District
Hispanic or Latino	94%	82%
African American	3%	9%
White	1%	4%
Asian	1%	1%
Two or More Races	1%	2%
English Learners	15%	20%
Foster Youth	1%	1%
Homeless Youth	13%	11%
Students with Disabilities	14%	16%
Migrant Education	0%	0%
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	75%	73%
Total	2,589	48,079

Source: California Department of Education. (2026). [2025-26 Enrollment by Ethnicity and Grade: Arroyo Valley High Report](#) (36-67876-3631082) DataQuest.

Table 2: Arroyo Valley High School Linked Learning Pathways

Industry Sector	Academy and Pathway	Linked Learning Certification
Arts, Media, and Entertainment	Visual and Performing Arts Pathway	—
	Digital Media Arts Academy	Gold
Education, Child Development, and Family Services	Educators for Tomorrow Academy	Gold
Business and Finance	Business and Logistics Academy	Gold
Energy, Environment, and Utilities	Constructing Opportunities in Renewable Energy (CORE) Academy	Gold
Public Service	Global Leadership Academy	—
Information and Communication Technologies	AniVation Tech Academy	Gold
—	Elevate Academy (early college)	—

Source: Arroyo Valley High School. (n.d.). Arroyo Valley High School Linked Learning pathways.

HOW ARROYO VALLEY TRANSFORMED THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Arroyo Valley's redesign stemmed from a district-wide decision in 2012, when San Bernardino City Unified adopted Linked Learning under Superintendent Dale Marsden. Dan Storz of the Linked Learning Alliance, which has partnered with the district for more than a decade, explained that the district "was looking for something to make ... the school system and the school experience for students more responsive to community needs." Marsden convened annual gatherings of students, families, educators, employers, city and county representatives, and community leaders to translate the district's strategic plan into a broader community engagement plan, shifting the district's focus toward real-world preparation and K–12 pathways (Fine et al., forthcoming). Sustained support from the Board of Education has helped the approach endure through changes in district leadership.

At Arroyo Valley, that direction took shape as a wall-to-wall pathway model. Rather than offering pathways as optional programs inside a traditional high school, a wall-to-wall school organizes its entire campus around them, so that each student's classes, teachers, and peers are tied to a pathway. Throughout the district, an academy typically consists of a multidisciplinary team of teachers who collaborate across subject areas and may encompass one or more related CTE pathways. Arroyo Valley staff often use the terms California Partnership Academy, CTE pathway, and Linked Learning pathway interchangeably. Arroyo Valley students choose from eight academies (see Table 2):

- **Digital Media Arts**, with pathways in graphic design and film
- **Educators for Tomorrow**, in education and child development
- **Business and Logistics**, in business and finance
- **Constructing Opportunities in Renewable Energy (CORE)**, in energy and utilities
- **Global Leadership**, in public service, which also houses the school's International Baccalaureate program
- **AniVation Tech**, in information and communication technology
- **Visual and Performing Arts**, in visual arts, music, theatre, and dance
- **Elevate Academy**, an on-campus early college program

In each of these academies, college preparatory academic coursework meeting A–G standards is available as well as industry-themed courses meeting CTE standards. Elevate Academy, the eighth pathway, offers an on-campus early college program alongside the industry-themed academies.

Over several years, the school's Linked Learning program specialist, Dimitrious Chronopoulos, and head counselor, Guinevere Pittman, worked with successive administrations to build the systems that hold it together: outreach to every incoming 9th-grader about pathway options, a placement process built around students' choices, and a master schedule that keeps cohorts of students together. By the time the current principal, Manuel Gonzalez, arrived in 2023–24 after nearly two decades in the district as a teacher and vice principal, those systems were well established.

The redesign has continued to evolve since then, often from ideas generated by staff. Recognizing that students were leaving for the district's Middle College High School to earn college credit, vice principal Kristy Castro spent a year planning with Middle College and San Bernardino Valley College. Middle College's data showed that dual enrollment students performed better with a dedicated support class, so the team built one into the design. Before launch, staff met with 8th-graders and their parents to walk through the program's downsides as well as its benefits. The result was a dual enrollment program with its own program specialist, alongside Elevate Academy. Over the same period, the AniVation Tech Academy grew from a class where students worked on computers and learned computer code into a partnership with the University of Redlands and Esri, the Redlands-based geographic information systems company. Gonzalez described his role as clearing the way for his team:

They pitch these ideas to me, and I'm like, "That sounds amazing, I think our kids need that." And so then I just say, what do you need? Let's put it in our budget.

– Manuel Gonzalez, Principal

The school has experienced positive student outcomes. Between 2021–22 and 2024–25, the graduation rate rose from 94% to 96%, which is well above the state average, and the school's A-G completion rate, the sequence of courses required for entry into the University of California and California State University systems, reached 55% among 2023–24 graduates. In addition, the share of students meeting or exceeding standard in math rose from 12% to 18% (San Bernardino City Unified School District, 2023, 2026).

What is Linked Learning?

Linked Learning integrates rigorous academics, career technical education (CTE), work-based learning, and personalized student support through industry-themed pathways. Students connect classroom learning to real-world challenges and future opportunities, completing both college-preparatory A-G coursework and CTE coursework organized around an industry theme.

The quality of a pathway is as important as its design. The Linked Learning Alliance's evidence-based quality standards define what high-quality college and career preparation looks like in practice. Developed by educators, students, and partners across the field, the standards emphasize integrated, student-centered learning across subject areas; meaningful connections to careers and postsecondary education; work-based learning; and student supports that promote equitable opportunities for all students.

Pathways can achieve two levels of certification: Silver and Gold. Pathway teams work with Linked Learning coaches and use the standards to assess their practice, identify areas for growth, and strengthen implementation over time. Gold is the highest level of certification, recognizing pathways that demonstrate high-quality implementation of integrated college and career learning against these standards.

At Arroyo Valley High School, five pathways hold Gold Certification. The standards inform pathway design and practice, and help educators and district leaders work to sustain and strengthen quality over time.

Source: Linked Learning Alliance. (2025). Linked Learning Gold Certification.
<https://www.linkedlearning.org/certification/gold-certification>

What Students Experience

The quality of a Linked Learning pathway lies not in any single activity, but in how its experiences work together to prepare students for college and career. At Arroyo Valley, that approach takes shape in industry-connected projects, work-based learning, postsecondary opportunities, and culminating demonstrations of student learning.

In a Digital Media Arts film course, 12th-graders review how to set up three-point lighting in the school's professional-grade studio and practice interviewing one another as they prepare to record video profiles of teachers for Teacher Appreciation Week. In the Constructing Opportunities in Renewable Energy (CORE) Academy, 10th-graders refine the technical details of architectural blueprints and scale models of homes they designed before cutting any material. Eleventh-graders in the Educators for Tomorrow Academy prepare for their weekly visit to a neighborhood elementary school, where they read with 1st-graders. Beforehand, they journal about what they learned about their young "buddies" the previous week and adjust their lesson plans accordingly (Fine et al., forthcoming).

Each pathway is expected to follow a common set of practices, including visiting speakers, pathway celebrations, and shared field experiences. Linked Learning staff expect this work to be purposeful rather than decorative (Fine et al., forthcoming). Field experiences are also a visible part of campus life. Buses leave campus often enough that Gonzalez regularly stops students to ask which pathway is heading out and where. After nearly two decades in the district, he sees the frequency of these trips as what sets Arroyo Valley apart: "I've never seen a school that takes our kids outside of the classroom in real learning ... [and shows them], 'This is why we're studying this here, so you can learn this out there.'"

Pathway themes extend into core academic classes. In a joint 11th-grade English and U.S. history project, AniVation students use Esri's ArcGIS software to build StoryMaps that trace the technical, industrial, civic, or environmental impact of a historical development, then write a formal paper on their findings. "It's their collaboration with Esri that is truly infused throughout the pathway," said Storz.

Pathways also give students a smaller community within the larger school. "At Arroyo, it's about the academy teams, the pathway teams, and they act as sort of a family and the center for knowing about the students in their pathway," Storz explained. Each pathway holds its own awards ceremonies in the school theater, names students of the month, and hosts parent nights. In certification reviews across the district, Storz said, parents consistently say that what they value most is that their children want to come to school:

For a parent ... who's working and got a million things to do and is trying to keep the family together, the fact that it's not pulling teeth for them to get their kid to go to school and do the work is just huge.

– Dan Storz, Linked Learning Alliance

Career-connected learning also gives students opportunities to contribute beyond campus. Arroyo Valley partners with more than two dozen organizations, including Dell Technologies, local credit unions, San Bernardino County, and North America's Building Trades Unions. Some partnerships are closely tied to a single pathway:

- **AniVation Tech Academy.** Students in this information and communication technology pathway work with two key partners: Esri, a Redlands-based geographic information systems (GIS) company, and the University of Redlands. Students also run an on-campus workspace where, in partnership with the district, they repair Chromebooks.
- **CORE Academy.** Students apply the skills they learn in class with GRID Alternatives, a nonprofit solar installer, to install solar panels.
- **Educators for Tomorrow Academy.** Students complete micro-internships alongside teachers, getting hands-on classroom experience.
- **Business and Logistics Academy.** Students compete in Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) and have collaborated with a local college to design a school pennant.

By their senior year, students are expected to demonstrate what they have learned. Each gold-certified pathway requires a culminating capstone or a defense of learning, and most students begin building toward it as early as 10th grade.

This work centers on preparing students for what comes after graduation. The Linked Learning quality standards emphasize meaningful connections to postsecondary education, including opportunities to earn college credit while in high school. Every pathway includes courses that carry college credit through articulation or dual enrollment, and all of the district's career technical education courses meet the A-G requirements for admission to the University of California and the California State University. District leaders highlight dual enrollment as one of Arroyo Valley's strengths. "They hit it out of the park with dual enrollment," said Dr. Sudha Venkatesan, the district's Director of Secondary Education, College and Career.

Arroyo Valley's dual enrollment program has grown in scope and support over time. Two years after launching its redesigned program, the school offers 10 dual enrollment courses each semester, up from one or two before its redesign, and enrollment grew from roughly 30 to 50 students schoolwide to 297 in 2025–26. College instructors teach on campus two days a week; on the remaining days, Arroyo Valley teachers who volunteer to give up their preparation period support students and monitor their progress. Elevate Academy takes this model further, with a schedule designed so students earn their diploma alongside substantial college credit. Articulation agreements open a second route to college credit. Since fall 2025, students in AniVation's Cyber 2 course have been eligible to earn credit from the University of Redlands; in 2025–26, 31 students earned four units in Introduction to Spatial Analysis and GIS and presented their work at Esri's headquarters in Redlands. The Visual and Performing Arts Academy has articulated its theatre and dance courses in the same way.

Industry credentials give students another way to show what they can do. In the Visual and Performing Arts Academy, where students study 2D and 3D art, music, theatre, and dance, students can earn an Adobe certification and a Garner Holt Animatronics certification. Staff is exploring credentials for other pathways, such as OSHA safety and forklift operation, that match regional demand in logistics and warehousing, giving students, in Gonzalez's words, "more experience that'll make them more marketable once they leave Arroyo Valley High School."

Many students arrive already familiar with these options. Arroyo Valley draws from feeder middle schools, including Magnolia Heights, where students take part in a gold-certified Design pathway. The structures that support students from that transition through graduation are described below.

The Structures That Make It Possible

Arroyo Valley supports its pathway model through organized pathway teams, dedicated time, student support, and community partnerships. These school structures are part of a broader district effort to connect academic learning, career preparation, and opportunities beyond graduation.

Small learning communities

Arroyo Valley's pathway structure begins before students arrive. Staff reach out to every 8th-grader at feeder middle schools to introduce the pathways, and students' selections determine their 9th-grade placement. Students remain in their pathway for all four years.

Much of the coordination is managed by the site-based Linked Learning program specialist, an out-of-classroom position funded by the district's Secondary Education, College and Career office rather than from school budgets. Every high school has one, and these site specialists work closely with the district office, which also has its own team of district-level program specialists. Site specialists also help build each school's master schedule, so that pathway priorities are reflected in how the school is organized. At Arroyo Valley, Chronopoulos meets with pathway leads once or twice a week to coordinate budgets, track grant spending, align courses, and plan articulation agreements with colleges. Pathway leads have autonomy to shape their pathway's vision and develop their own partnerships. The program specialist and pathway leads handle day-to-day direction, while Gonzalez describes his role as supporting and funding their ideas. Formal roles for other teachers, as well as for students and families, are more limited (see What Comes Next).

Scheduling

The master schedule uses specialized course codes to keep pathway cohorts together in their shared courses, and district leaders expect program specialists to have a seat at the table when principals build it. Two pathways, Educators for Tomorrow and CORE, are California Partnership Academies, a state-funded model that requires students to be cohorted in core academic and career technical courses. Teachers in each share a common preparation period, with the first period for CORE and the fourth for Educators for Tomorrow, which they use to align assignments and plan cross-curricular work. Teachers in the other pathways do not share a daily planning period.

Instead, weekly late-start Mondays provide protected time, organized into a four-week cycle. Teachers spend two Mondays learning a schoolwide strategy, then plan with their departments to apply it. The fourth Monday is reserved for pathway teams to align units, plan cross-curricular projects, and organize field trips. Because each pathway decides how to use that time, the depth of collaboration between academic and technical teachers varies across pathways.

Relationships and coordinated support

After reviewing student and family survey data, Arroyo Valley chose a sense of community as a schoolwide focus for the first quarter of 2026–27. Rather than adopting a single practice, leaders encouraged teachers to learn every student's name quickly, greet students at the door, and choose relationship-building strategies that fit their classrooms. Beyond the pathways, however, the school does not yet have a structure, such as an advisory, that ensures every student has a consistent adult connection, so how students experience belonging depends largely on their pathway and their teachers.

Schoolwide supports are layered on top of the pathways. A district-funded multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) coordinator first built academic interventions in math and reading, then created a referral system so teachers can flag students who need help with attendance, mental health, or learning. Referrals go to a single triage point, which routes students to counseling, tutoring, or other services. The school also opened a wellness center upstairs near the counseling office, furnished with dim lighting, comfortable seating, and a massage chair.

The center follows a simple routine where students sign in with the counseling secretary, take 15 to 20 minutes to decompress, and then meet with a counselor. Recently, Gonzalez walked a student there after finding her in tears on the anniversary of her brother's death, so she could use that space before talking with a counselor. Counselors document each visit and decide whether students need further support at school or from an outside agency. A therapist now serves students on campus one day a week, and her caseload filled within her first week.

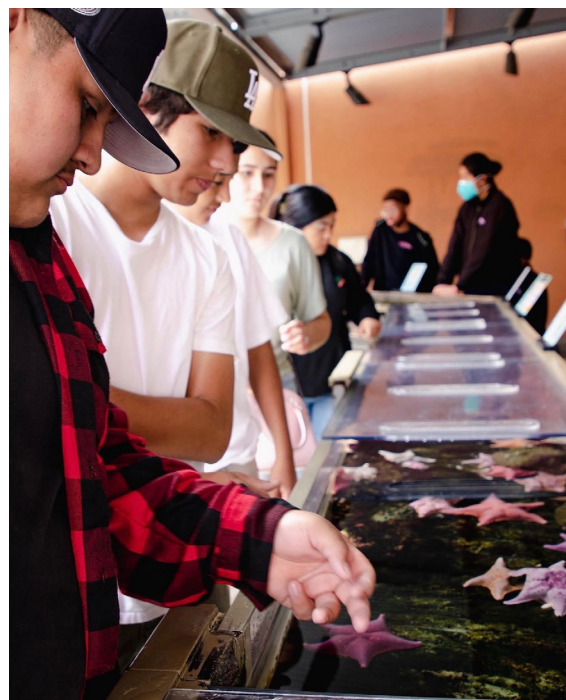
Connections to the larger community

Arroyo Valley's partnerships are built at multiple levels. Pathway leads cultivate partners aligned with their industry themes. The program specialist brokers larger partnerships, such as the one linking AniVation, the University of Redlands, and Esri, as well as articulation agreements. That partnership has since connected AniVation to additional partners, including the City of Redlands and San Bernardino County. A district workforce coordinator with deep ties to county employers manages relationships that span schools. Each high school also has a college and career readiness teacher who works alongside the program specialist on dual enrollment and college admissions, and the district provides a college intern to support both roles. At the district level, a strong relationship with the local Teamsters union has created opportunities for students, and union members regularly speak in support of pathway work at school board meetings.

District support and continuous improvement

Arroyo Valley staff describe the district as a responsive partner. The district's college and career team, led by Venkatesan and assistant director Dr. Alan Kay, helps the school apply for grants, manage funds and reporting, and articulate courses with the University of California, Riverside. Because the district's curriculum and career technical education staff work as one team, an assistant director on the curriculum side is currently helping Arroyo Valley finalize an agreement for one of its pathway courses. The district also offers annual professional development series aligned with districtwide priorities, such as cooperative learning strategies in 2025–26 and academic rigor and student collaboration in 2026–27, and funds an MTSS coordinator at every high school.

Arroyo Valley follows up on district training through its own coaching and classroom visits. Each administrator visits at least five classrooms a week to look for six practices: posted learning intentions and success criteria, bell-to-bell instruction, checks for understanding, active engagement, a closing activity, and evidence of community and belonging. At their Tuesday meeting, administrators tally what they observed. The following Monday, they share the results with staff, along with strategies worth borrowing, such as a teacher who opened class by asking students which ice cream they remembered from childhood, or another who had students point to an emoji chart to show how they were feeling. In the first weeks of 2026–27, walkthrough data showed community-building practices in 96% of visited classrooms.



Evidence of Progress

Progress has been steady at Arroyo Valley. Between 2021–22 and 2024–25, the graduation rate climbed from 94% to 96%, well above the district average of 85% and the state average of 88%. In 2024–25, 59% of graduates were prepared for college and career on the state's College/Career Indicator (CCI), up 10 points from the prior year's revised rate of 49% and above both the district (50%) and the state (52%). The share of graduates completing the A-G courses required for admission to California's public universities rose from 49% of 2021–22 graduates to 55% of 2023–24 graduates (San Bernardino City Unified School District, 2024, 2026). Suspensions fell by nearly half, from 8% to 4% (San Bernardino City Unified School District, 2023, 2026). ELA scores held steady during this time, with 37% of students meeting or exceeding standard in both years, above the district (35%) but below the state (48%). Math scores rose from 12% to 18% of students meeting or exceeding standard, though they remain below district (22%) and state (37%) averages. Table 3 compares Arroyo Valley's graduation rates and test results with district and state averages over the same four years.

Table 3: Graduation Rates, College/Career Readiness, and Share of Students Meeting or Exceeding Standard in ELA and Math at Arroyo Valley, San Bernardino City Unified, and California, 2021–22 to 2024–25

Outcome	2021-22			2022-23			2023-24			2024-25		
	Arroyo Valley	District	State	Arroyo Valley	District	State	Arroyo Valley	District	State	Arroyo Valley	District	State
Four-year graduation rate	94%	83%	87%	96%	82%	86%	95%	83%	86%	96%	85%	88%
Graduates prepared on the College/Career Indicator	n/r	n/r	n/r	52%	39%	44%	49%	43%	49%	59%	50%	52%
ELA (met or exceeded standard)	37%	33%	47%	36%	31%	46%	36%	33%	47%	37%	35%	48%
Math (met or exceeded standard)	12%	18%	33%	14%	19%	34%	12%	20%	35%	18%	22%	37%

Source: San Bernardino City Unified School District. (2023, 2024, 2025, 2026). Arroyo Valley High School: School Accountability Report Cards, 2021–22 through 2024–25. CCI: California Department of Education. (2023, 2024, 2025). California School Dashboard College/Career Indicator data files.

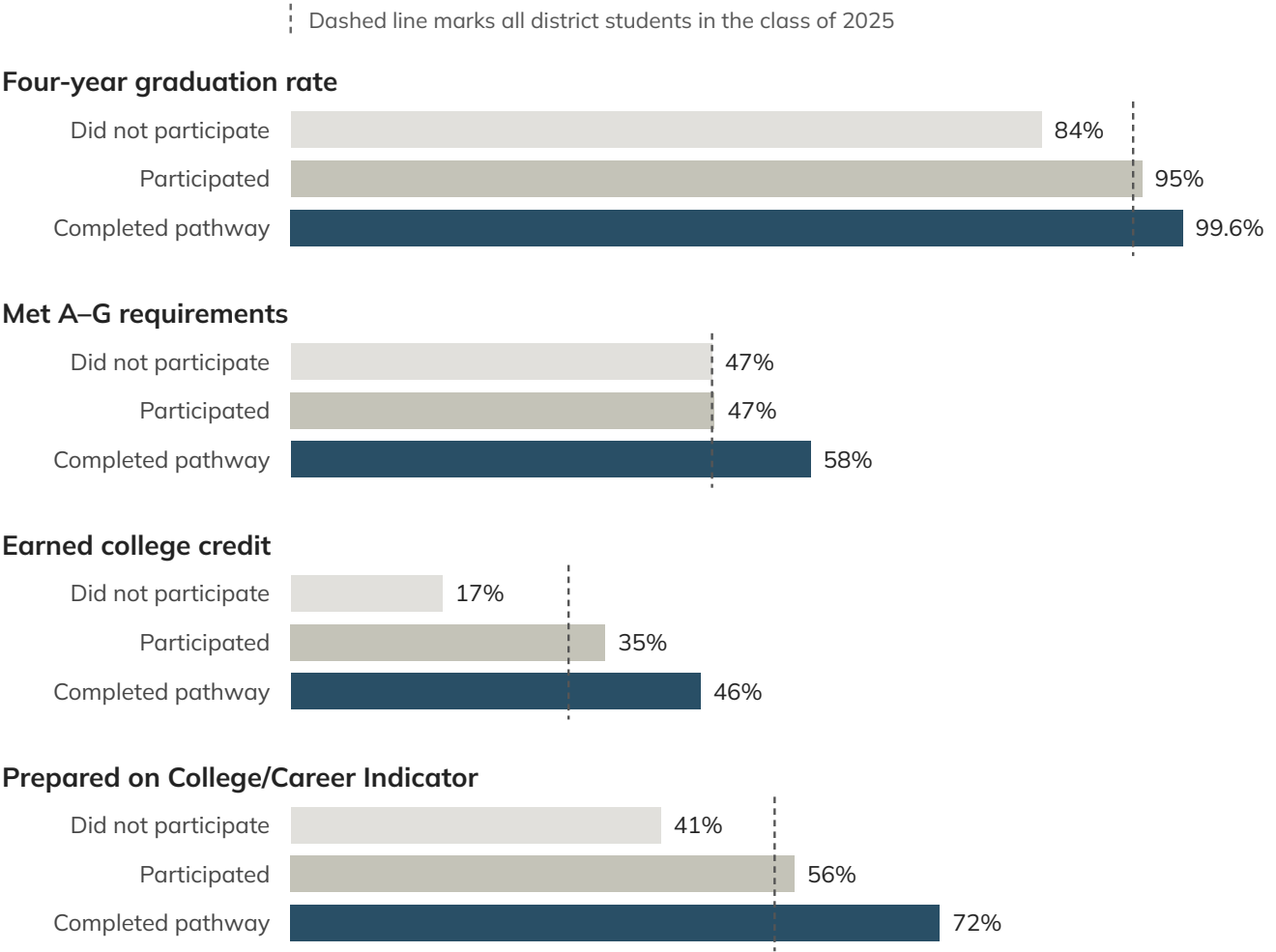
Notes: n/r indicates not reported, as the state did not report the College/Career Indicator for 2021–22. The state revised its calculation in 2025, so year-to-year changes are approximate. Each year's figures reflect the state's prior year's calculation.

District data point to the value of completing a pathway. Among San Bernardino City Unified’s class of 2025, students who completed a career technical education pathway graduated, completed A-G requirements, earned college credit, and met the state’s College/Career Indicator at higher rates than students who did not participate in a pathway (see Figure 1). Nearly all pathway completers (99.6%) graduated, compared with 83.8% of students who did not take part in a pathway. According to district leaders, this pattern has held for three years.

Figure 1: Class of 2025 Outcomes by Pathway Participation, San Bernardino City Unified

Pathway completers outpaced peers on every measure, class of 2025

San Bernardino City Unified, share of students by level of career technical education pathway participation



Source: San Bernardino City Unified School District, (n.d.). High school redesign [Presentation by S. Venkatesan], class of 2025 (N = 3,187 for graduation and college credit; 2,985 for A-G and CCI; 1,383 pathway completers). Note: “Participated” includes all students who took part in a pathway, including completers.

Part of a District-Wide Effort

Arroyo Valley’s design reflects the choices San Bernardino City Unified has made across its system. The district serves over 48,000 students across 75 schools (California Department of Education, 2026), and nearly 89% are classified as high need under California’s Local Control Funding Formula (Linked Learning Alliance, 2026). Over 14 years, it has built what the Linked Learning Alliance describes as one of the state’s largest systems of Linked Learning pathways, spanning 13 of California’s 15 industry sectors. Today, 42% of the district’s 12,906 high school students are enrolled in Linked Learning pathways (Linked Learning Alliance, 2026). In December 2025, the district joined the Linked Learning Alliance and five peer districts as partners in California’s Secondary School Redesign Pilot Program.

Table 4: Stages of Linked Learning Implementation in San Bernardino City Unified

Years	Stage	Milestones
2012	Approval and launch	School board approves the Linked Learning approach
2014–2017	Active implementation	12 complete, cohort-scheduled pathways in operation
2018–2019	Regional scaling and integration	54 pathways across all high school sites; first pathway earns Linked Learning certification in 2019
2020–present	Quality and sustainability	45 pathways; 16 gold-certified and 18 silver-certified pathways

Source: Linked Learning Alliance. (2026). San Bernardino City Unified School District Linked Learning site visit pre-read.

Community voice continues to shape the work. After district staff presented pathway outcomes to the school board, the parent wing of Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC), a faith-based community organizing network, invited them to a meeting. ICUC surveyed local youth and found that many families were unaware of the pathways. Families also asked for more teaching pathways like Arroyo Valley’s Educators for Tomorrow, and the district is exploring options to meet these needs. Students have a voice as well: the school board includes four student members, and district staff attend the Student Leadership Council.

A Connected K–12 Experience

Purposeful pathways are designed to span a student’s education, moving from career awareness in elementary school to exploration in middle school and increasingly concrete experiences in high school (Fine et al., forthcoming). The district supports pathways at three of its middle schools through funding, curriculum support, help hiring instructors, and access to Linked Learning conferences.

Magnolia Heights Middle School, an IB Middle Years Programme school that sends many of its students to Arroyo Valley, illustrates this progression. Every Magnolia Heights student participates in its Design pathway, a gold-certified Linked Learning pathway built on the IB design cycle, where most students alternate between Design and Visual and Performing Arts classes each semester.

Each spring, Arroyo Valley staff visit Magnolia Heights for a lunchtime “road show” and a morning assembly about pathway options, and they join the middle school’s coffee with the principal to share pathway information with families. Magnolia Heights has also begun building student portfolios on the same platform students will use in high school, so they can continue that work rather than starting over.

When district staff surveyed 8th-graders through the Student Leadership Council, students said they wanted to see every pathway in one place. The district responded with a two-day career technical education showcase in fall 2026, at an estimated cost of \$300,000. On the first day, families, community members, unions, employers, the mayor, and city council members toured exhibits from every high school, staffed by pathway students and teachers. On the second day, nearly 4,000 8th-graders, every 8th-grader in the district, including students with disabilities, watched drones fly, saw first-aid demonstrations, examined anatomical models, and explored a cybersecurity exhibit.

The District Conditions That Support the Work

A pivotal step in the district redesign journey came when the head of the district's career technical education department, a separate office at the time, retired. Venkatesan, then the director of secondary education, had watched the two departments send schools conflicting messages. She approached the superintendent's cabinet and offered to absorb the department into her office at no extra cost, as an experiment. The merged department, Secondary Education, College and Career, now operates as one team. Its director oversees both math textbook adoption and career technical education course approval, and the assistant director for career technical education also oversees Advanced Placement, so a principal can discuss a pathway grant and AP offerings in the same conversation. "I'm blurring the lines," Venkatesan said. The department organized its work around the purposeful pathways framework, which aligns with the Linked Learning standards. It links five elements and serves as a filter for every decision:

1. **Rigorous academics.** All career technical education courses are A-G approved, about half as electives and the rest as science, history, or arts credit.
2. **Postsecondary connections.** Every pathway is connected to dual enrollment or articulated college credit. More than 40 high school courses earn college credit, and about one in three students participates in dual enrollment, with completion rates near 80%.
3. **Industry certifications.** The district vetted every certification its pathways offer to ensure it carries value in the labor market. Students earned more than 2,000 in a single recent school year.
4. **Industry partners.** Employers and labor organizations validate alignment with industry standards and open access to internships and pre-apprenticeships.
5. **Work-based learning.** Every pathway at every high school has a work-based learning continuum. In 2024–25, 1,370 students completed micro-internships and 278 were in pre-apprenticeships pending competency certification.

The district also measures each pathway's strength. Modeling its approach on the state dashboards for English and math, the department developed three criteria: regional labor market demand, pathway enrollment, and pathway completion, defined as students earning a C or better across the full course sequence (see Table 5). The department reviews the results with principals every semester, and the questions behind the data are concrete. They ask questions like, "Why did one pathway classroom have 7 students while another had 35? Why were students who chose a pathway out of interest not earning a C or better in its courses?" A year in, leaders narrowed their focus to the two criteria schools can most directly influence: enrollment and, above all, completion.

Table 5: San Bernardino City Unified Pathway Performance Criteria

Level	Labor market demand	Pathway enrollment	Pathway completion rate
High	Top 1–3 industry sectors (61%)	Average class size of 28 or more	Above the school's pathway completion average
Medium	Top 4–7 industry sectors (31%)	Average class size of 21–27	At or near the school's pathway completion average
Low	Remaining industry sectors (9%)	Average class size of 20 or fewer	Below the school's pathway completion average

Source: San Bernardino City Unified School District. (n.d.). High school redesign [Presentation by S. Venkatesan].

This previous review of the district's pathways led to difficult choices. Of roughly 55 pathways, 45 met the bar, and over two years, the district phased out the rest as teachers retired or enrollment declined. “We can’t support a pathway that serves only 10 students. That’s not equity,” Venkatesan said.

Funding reinforces these priorities. The district braids federal Perkins funds, the state’s Career Technical Education Incentive Grant, the Strong Workforce Program, California Partnership Academy grants, and its Local Control and Accountability Plan. It received \$36.5 million in career technical education grants over 10 years and \$50 million in career technical education infrastructure over five years (Fine et al., forthcoming). It allocates Perkins and Incentive Grant dollars in a way that rewards completion: schools receive more per student in advanced pathway courses than in introductory ones. Career technical education teachers are compensated on the same scale as all certificated staff.

Connections Beyond Graduation

With its pathway system in place, the district is now focusing on what comes after graduation. College and career readiness teachers and program specialists work together on dual enrollment and college admissions. District leaders report that the number of students receiving admission to California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) at its Instant Admit Days increased by about 57% over two years. On Instant Admit Days, CSUSB admissions counselors review seniors’ transcripts and admit qualified students on-the-spot to the university.

The district’s Pathway to Position initiative addresses another challenge graduates face: getting employers to recognize high school experience. The district proposed that San Bernardino County, the region’s largest employer, recognize pathway completers with at least 300 hours of work-based learning as having the equivalent of one year of experience for aligned county jobs. Under the initiative, seniors work with County Human Resources to learn the application process so they can apply for stable, living-wage jobs as soon as they graduate (Fine et al., forthcoming). Through this partnership, students who complete the district’s career technical education pathways now meet the minimum qualifications for entry-level jobs in almost every county department (Linked Learning Alliance, 2026). For Arroyo Valley students, these connections are meant to turn pathway experiences into concrete next steps after graduation.

State Policies That Support School Success

Several major state initiatives, building on local investments, have contributed to both the district and the school's redesign efforts:

- The [California Community Schools Partnership Program](#) has invested \$4.1 billion since 2021 in developing community schools that support family and community engagement, integrated supports for students, expanded learning time, and shared decision-making in settings that support social and emotional learning and restorative practices (Swain et al., 2025).
- The [Golden State Pathways Program](#), established in 2022, has invested \$500 million in industry-themed pathways that offer integrated coursework and internships that can provide both high school and college credit.
- Investments in dual enrollment opportunities, including an additional \$200 million in 2022, support California high schools and community colleges to establish opportunities for high school students to take credit-bearing college courses during the school day.
- [21st Century Community Learning Centers](#) funding helps to support peer mentoring and peer tutoring after school.

In 2025, the governor of California issued a Career Master Plan that creates a vision for integrating initiatives across the education, labor, and higher education sectors and proposes a Career Passport to recognize competencies. In the 2025–26 budget, the state invested \$10 million in a pilot program to support high school redesign, and then reaffirmed that decision in 2026, with an additional \$50 million investment in the program, with the addition of middle schools and an overall emphasis on community schools. This program will continue to shape learning for both schools and state policymakers as it identifies opportunities for further innovations in policy and practice.

What Comes Next

Several priorities are shaping the next stage of the school's and district's work. Some rest mainly with Arroyo Valley, such as deepening academic language in core classes and giving students and families a stronger voice in decisions. Others sit with the district, such as aligning its pathway, wellness, and community school efforts. The two levels converge most clearly in connecting pathway themes to core academics, where district planning and school practice depend on each other.

Deepening academic language and rigor. At Arroyo Valley, Principal Gonzalez's top priority is strengthening core instruction so students can explain and defend their thinking. Teachers use sentence stems, word walls, and structured discussion, then gradually remove those supports. In one Advanced Placement class, a teacher scaffolds students' writing in the fall and steps back by spring. "I want to see more in the classroom of students dominating the academic vocabulary, that technical vocabulary, and not just answering A, B, C, D, but being able to explain," Principal Gonzalez said.

Connecting pathway themes and core academics. The school and the district share this priority. Integration is strongest in the two California Partnership Academies. Extending it to every pathway, particularly math, is the district's next frontier and will require time and structures for academic and technical teachers to design together (Fine et al., forthcoming). District leaders can point to what integration looks like when it works. When students visited a carpenters' union training center, they saw apprentices working through problems involving similar triangles and volume calculations, and the connection to their own geometry class was immediate. This year, district program specialists are mapping where career technical education and core academic standards overlap and plan to pilot cross-curricular units at schools with strong professional learning communities, including Arroyo Valley. Starting where conditions are strongest can build momentum, but it leaves open how the district will reach departments and schools that have not yet opted in. "My dream ... [is] a seamless collaboration between the content and CTE teachers," Venkatesan said. "We have come a long way."

Expanding work-based learning to every pathway. Several pathways offer internships and partner projects, while others are still developing them. Staff is also exploring how partnerships can reflect the community's most pressing needs so that students' experiences align with where the region is headed.

Strengthening student and family voice. Pathways gather input through family nights, surveys, and, in some cases, student boards, and the school hosts regular coffee meetings with the principal. School leaders see room to formalize these structures so that students and families help shape decisions, not only offer feedback.

Bringing initiatives together. San Bernardino City Unified has already merged its academic and career technical education offices. Extending that coherence to the offices that support wellness, family engagement, and community schools could make it easier for schools like Arroyo Valley to offer students a single, coherent experience.

Arroyo Valley shows how a large comprehensive high school can organize into smaller communities. Through cohort-based pathways, real-world learning, expanded access to college credit, and a growing web of supports, the school is working to give students both a sense of belonging and a clearer view of what comes next. California is investing in this kind of redesign: the state invested \$10 million in a Secondary School Redesign Pilot Program in 2025, followed by \$50 million to expand the work (Fine et al., forthcoming). As those efforts unfold, Arroyo Valley and San Bernardino City Unified offer an example of how a district-wide vision and school-level innovation can reinforce each other.



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