

SCALING IMPACT

TRANSFORMING THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE IN A RURAL DISTRICT

PORTERVILLE, CALIFORNIA



BE FUTURE
READY



Our country's most populous state, California, has more students in school than 36 states have in their total population. In 2007, 2 million students were enrolled in high school in California and the drop-out rate was 20%. One in five students was dropping out of school. High school drop-outs are more likely to be incarcerated or unemployed than graduates.

California's vast landscape posed additional challenges for rural communities. Students often lacked access to the educational opportunities of their urban peers. Children in California's rural communities often came from Latino backgrounds and spoke a language other than English at home, and many lived in poverty. In addition, rural communities in California in the early 2000s were suffering from high unemployment rates, while companies struggled to find skilled workers locally.

Something had to change.

The initiative to improve the college and career readiness of students in Porterville, California started with building a new magnet high school in the 2007-08 school year, designed to incorporate a career academy program of study. Funding for the school was allocated from a California state grant. Engineering and Performing Arts were identified as the two career strands that would meet economic trends and student needs. The search for experience in implementing career education at the high school level led the district to NAF.

This case study offers an in-depth look at how a rural school district used the NAF educational design to create wide-scale reform to make a difference for its students and the community at large.

According to the California Department of Education data, in Porterville Unified School District between 2010-2011 and 2014-2015, the graduation rate increased from 78.1% to 84.3%. When reviewing outcomes for NAF academy students in particular, in 2015-2016, the district reported the graduation rate was 99%.

NAF offers "Scaling Impact: Transforming the High School Experience at a Rural School District" as an inspiration to all who seek to transform our nation's most in-need school districts and empower our communities to meet the needs of our nation's future workforce.

The Porterville experience represents the possibilities of what can be accomplished when the NAF educational design is implemented, scaled, and sustained. These outcomes can be replicated in communities small and large, with similar and unique challenges.

The NAF educational design has the power to transform school systems, strengthen communities, and build a skilled workforce. Together with NAF, systemic and social change is possible.

In 2009, Porterville became one of nine districts involved in Linked Learning's district initiative, which provided funding and technical support to improve student outcomes and grow career and technical education in what became known as "career pathways." Pathways overlapped with many of NAF's career themes and included additional themes related to California's projected workforce needs.

The district had one goal in mind – to prepare more students for college and career success.

The first NAF academy at Harmony Magnet High School showed promise at improving college and career readiness. Student outcomes led district leaders to adopt a long-range systemic approach to career academy expansion across the district. With support from the school board, superintendent, teachers' union, school-based leadership, instructional staff, and community, a four-year pathway implementation plan was developed that turned the district into a career-centered operation.

But planning was not without its challenges. Access was the biggest one. The district leadership team recognized that all students would need access to the career theme of their choice. In addition, Porterville's geography posed significant transportation issues to improving access. The superintendent and board decided to allocate resources to augment already extensive busing to include transporting all high school students to the school that housed the academy of their choice.

By 2016, the district would be home to 13 NAF academies across NAF's five career themes and additional themes that serve the needs of its community. It would become a model for using the NAF educational design to implement any career pathway.

NAF

NAF offered the city of Porterville a structure, research base, and road map for successful district-wide reorganization and redesign. At the time, NAF was launching its Academy of Engineering -- following over twenty years of growth in its finance, hospitality & tourism, and information technology themes. Because of the constant innovation in the field, NAF accepted curriculum from third parties that stayed current with the trends in engineering. Project Lead the Way became the first curriculum provider for the new theme and Harmony Magnet was part of the first cohort of Academies of Engineering.

Porterville also established a partnership with ConnectEd to assist in creating and supporting other career pathways. Both NAF and ConnectEd are members of the Linked Learning Alliance, a collaborative effort funded by the Irvine Foundation, to support college and career readiness across districts in California. Together, these organizations provided Porterville with the skills, knowledge, and experience to build a foundation for success.

With support from ConnectEd and Linked Learning Alliance, Harmony Magnet Academy of Engineering participated in NAF's Year of Planning: a process of planning, strategy, and implementation to assure the sustainability and quality of the academy design.

Through the Year of Planning, Porterville USD gained access to systems of quality assurance and support, guidelines to set expectations, benchmarks to assess progress and encourage innovation, and established rapport with corporate partners.

The Academy of Engineering pilot provided an important opportunity for Harmony Magnet to receive support for training engineering teachers, attending annual meetings focused on engineering course supplements that were developed in partnership with ConnectEd, learning work-based learning strategies, and establishing industry partnerships in engineering career fields.

NAF supported the academy in putting the elements of the educational design into place: academy development, NAF industry-vetted curriculum, advisory boards, and work-based learning activities. **3**

In Porterville, strong superintendent leadership fueled the growth and success of NAF academies. Superintendent Dr. John Snively had held the position since 2001. His connection to the business community and understanding of the need for homegrown talent helped the district realize that the career academy model could help increase graduation rates, college attendance, and workforce readiness.

Under Superintendent Snively, Porterville followed a distributed leadership model. Snively made a key decision to provide strong district support and oversight for the project by creating the Pathways Office. The new department consisted of a director, pathway coaches, and work-based learning coordinators who focus on providing instructional support and work-based learning opportunities to career academies. Many in this Office were former teachers in the district. Their job was to work with academy teacher teams to foster a community of practice and to help write student learning outcomes and develop projects. Work-based learning coordinators developed and managed all work-based learning opportunities for all academies. These positions helped take the administrative load off teachers, who could then focus on their students. The coordinators also provided optional, age-appropriate career awareness events for elementary and middle school students in the district.

Along with the Pathways Office, district leaders created a series of teams that provide various types of support to the academies: an executive team made up of district leaders who had intensive input in the direction of the academy initiative; an executive advisory board made up of the leaders of the various advisory boards, college representatives, and community members who advise the executive board and build support for the academies throughout the community; advisory boards for each academy, including postsecondary representation; a principals and leads team comprised of principals and academy lead teachers from each high school; and academy teams consisting of a lead teacher, teachers, and a counselor, all specifically dedicated to that academy.

These layers of district support encouraged collaboration and built collective leadership capacity. Rather than increase bureaucracy, the various team meetings allowed for joint decision-making in which teachers and others became leaders, thus expanding ownership of the initiative and redistributing leadership at all levels. The meetings were results-driven, where student achievement propels the discussion and decisions. Meeting leaders were responsible for making sure issues were resolved and that communication was occurring in both directions. This enabled teachers to be aware of and connected to actions of the district or advisory board chairs.



One local business owner described the difficulties he faced hiring a skilled workforce for his agricultural research and development firm. He needed highly skilled agronomists and plant scientists, but was historically unable to hire locally because the graduating population did not have the extensive science background that the job required. Instead he hired several Ph.D.s from other countries, but for various reasons they did not stay. Recruiting, hiring, and training costs were high, especially since the company experienced a lot of turnover. Once the Harmony Magnet Academy of Engineering was established, he decided to get involved in the advisory board in hopes of addressing the need for a highly skilled local workforce.

He has worked with the academy since its inception. Although it is too early for career academy graduates to have earned a doctorate, he has had academy interns, one of whom returns to work for his company during the summers while she earns her bachelor's degree from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. She has been invaluable in modernizing the office at this small business and helping the staff upgrade their skills. This business owner understands the long-term nature of the investment of his time and energy in improving education in Porterville and can already see some return on his investment in supporting Porterville's pathways.

In addition to the better-prepared workforce that the pathways provide, the improvements in the educational system in Porterville also attracted new business to the area because the school district stands head and shoulders above others in the region. It is a district to which employees and new arrivals can feel confident about sending their children, knowing they will get a quality education that prepares them for college and careers. Teachers are also attracted to the area because they know that the schools are high quality, the opportunity to collaborate is there, the school board and district are supportive, and the students are engaged in learning in the career-themed context of their choice.

PUSD rents community venues to make their work public, to support community enterprises, to bring community resources to the initiative, and to provide community exposure to the academies and PUSD students. Just as being in a pathway means students engaging with their community, district events can serve to engage the larger community in the initiative.

PUSD uses the local multiplex to hold its Pathway Showcase for all 8th graders. Students are bused to the theatre, where they are greeted by Pathway ambassadors. They sit in the various screen rooms and watch high school students—their neighbors or siblings' friends—on the big screen describe and demonstrate what they are learning in their academies. This helps 8th grade students select an academy and get excited about attending high school.

The district's annual College and Career Mentor conference - the only one of its kind in California - is held at a popular local church. This event for sophomores offers students an opportunity to learn from and listen to business leaders. This has become a do-not-miss event among local businesses, who line up to meet and greet the students when they arrive dressed for success. The sessions focus on teamwork, ethics, and the importance of first impressions. The day ends with businesspeople telling their career pathway stories and fielding questions.

Using technology to organize work-based learning:

District staff organized a districtwide online registration system to coordinate WBL offerings. They began by asking the employers on their advisory boards for all internship opportunities they had to offer. These were entered into the portal at the occupational level. Students register and select three options. These are then sent back to the advisory board, who can see which students are interested in which opportunities. Students receive a custom internship document with the description of the opportunity. Once they have completed the internship, the flyer provides the necessary information to add to their resume. As employers call the district with additional opportunities, they are entered into the database and appear on the students' portal.

BRIDGE TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

California has some unique challenges when it comes to bridging the high school and college learning experiences. The University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) require entering freshmen to complete certain courses in high school. These courses are called the “a-g” courses because of the letter each subject area is assigned. To receive “a-g” credit, a high school course must be certified through the UC course approval process. In Porterville, preparing students for college and career is critical, so meeting “a-g” requirements was essential. To this end, the district has established a strong relationship with Porterville College and is a partner in an important Irvine funded program to train teachers to work effectively in academy settings.

Porterville College has stepped up to the plate as a strong partner. The college is working closely with PUSD to produce highly-skilled graduates. Courses are developed to provide dual enrollment options for academies and as the themes grow, the dual enrollment offerings grow. Without statewide articulation or a dual enrollment policy, the relationship between Porterville Unified School District and Porterville College is an important addition to students’ repertoire of course options. In addition, the college has created technical courses to support career academy themes. These courses supplement Advanced Placement courses and are seen as preferential choices for students because there is no extra exam to pass in order to earn college credit. Porterville College counselors go to Porterville Unified School District high schools to proctor college placement tests and to register students en masse to attend the college. Finally, the partnership is further enhanced by the strong presence of faculty members participating on the district’s theme-based advisory boards.

Academy of Performing Arts (APA) students can audition for a Career Kids role as their capstone project. Career Kids visit 6th grade classrooms across the district, portraying working adults in occupations related to the academies. Each selected APA student meets a “peer mentor” student from each academy in PUSD, researches an occupation related to that academy, and interviews a community member involved in that occupation. They then create a persona in that career and portray that character to the 6th graders. The performances serve as career awareness for the younger students and as the culminating project for those APA students, along with research and reflection papers.

The district also participates in a partnership with the California State University system called the Fresno State South Valley Partnership Program. This project, funded by the Irvine Foundation in partnership Linked Learning, establishes partnerships with state colleges that bring a satellite teacher preparation program to nearby partner districts. The program embeds Linked Learning principles into teacher training programs so that career academy/pathway principles and practices are central to state teacher induction programs. In PUSD, all teacher credential courses associated with this program are held at school campuses. These student teachers provide rich opportunities for the cross-fertilization of ideas and for building the capacity of PUSD teachers as well as preparing new teachers who may choose to work for the district.



ACHIEVING HIGH QUALITY: THE ROAD TO DISTINGUISHED

Harmony Magnet's Academy of Engineering became the first engineering academy to reach Distinguished level – NAF's highest level of achievement – in 2013. Taking advantage of the resources available, the principal created a strong team, allotted common planning time and accessed district supports for work-based learning for this to occur. The academy is a four-time Distinguished academy and the latest NAF academy at Harmony – the Academy of Performing Arts – was the first to reach Distinguished through a non-NAF theme, showing the power and flexibility of the educational design.

With a healthy sense of competition across academies and an availability of district resources, the Porterville High School Academy of Finance went on to reach distinguished status in 2014, and the Porterville High School Academy of Health Sciences was one of the first academies in NAF's newest theme to reach Distinguished the following year in 2015.

Porterville's success has reached far and wide and has not gone unnoticed. The district now serves as a mentor district to other Linked Learning Alliance participants.

THE FUTURE LOOKS LIKE

While Porterville has seen great success with its reform, the district is not ready to rest on its laurels. They are always looking to recalibrate and introduce new pathways to the city so long as the support structure is in place to ensure success. They are dedicated to growing internship opportunities, educating businesses on the value of hiring high school students, and playing an active role in shaping their future workforce. In the short term, they will continue to serve more students and offer high quality experiences in their many NAF academies throughout the district.



MISSION

NAF solves some of the biggest challenges facing education and the economy by bringing education, business, and community leaders together to transform the high school experience.

VISION

NAF envisions a world in which all young people have equal opportunity for successful futures.

ABOUT

NAF is a national network of education, business, and community leaders who work together to ensure high school students are college, career, and future ready. NAF's educational design ignites students' passion for learning and gives businesses the opportunity to shape America's future workforce by transforming the learning environment to include STEM infused industry-specific curricula and work-based learning experiences, including internships. Since 1982, NAF has been partnering with existing high schools in high-need communities to enhance school systems at a low cost by implementing NAF academies – small learning communities within traditional high schools. NAF has grown from one NAF Academy of Finance in New York City to hundreds of academies across the country focusing on growing industries, including finance, hospitality & tourism, information technology, engineering, and health sciences.



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