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EXEMPLIFYING EXCELLENCE IN OUTCOMES-DRIVEN WORK-BASED LEARNING

A PORTERVILLE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT CASE STUDY

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NAF is a national education non-profit that brings schools and businesses together to better prepare high school students for future careers. Since 1980, NAF has led a movement for immersive, career-focused teaching and work-based learning in high school. With the support of NAF community-based advisory boards, schools connect with the workforce to fuel shared progress, creating a variety of work-based learning opportunities across the continuum. NAF helps students explore career options, create a plan for the future, and take part in hands-on, work-based learning unlike anything traditional public education systems can offer. NAF puts students on a path to achieving their full potential.

ODWBL: A New Model for Elevating Student Impact

Recognizing the importance of having a structured approach to how WBL can positively impact students' future readiness, NAF embarked on a multi-year journey to create a new model. Four key goals informed the development process, including increasing the focus on student voice and reflection, defining specific outcomes rather than general guidelines, creating impact by design, not default, and emphasizing how individual-level student data can fuel a cycle of continuous improvement. Following more than three years of research, conversations with stakeholders, collaboration with MHA Labs, and conducting multiple pilots, NAF launched the [Outcomes-Driven Work-based Learning \(ODWBL\) model](#) in July 2023.

ODWBL focuses on 3 key student-centered outcomes: identifying career aspirations and mapping a plan to reach their goals; building [Future Ready skills](#) and receiving feedback; and developing connections with professionals who can help them navigate their path forward.

In order to track progress towards these outcomes, NAF developed a suite of new tech tools, including the WBL Participation Tracker, Reflection Form, and Skills Feedback Form. These provide educators and school leaders with expanded data to track student progress, inform WBL planning, and engage Advisory Board members and partners.



Aspirations

Each student will have defined and mapped a plan for at least one career path.



Work-based learning activities help students explore careers of interest, set goals for themselves, and make action plans to accomplish milestones along the way. As they navigate their unique journeys to discover what they do or do not want to pursue along their skills-driven path, they will continue to learn, connect, and reflect on their growth towards college and career readiness. It also enables students to make more informed decisions about their next steps after high school, including whether they want to enter the workforce immediately or go to college and what they want to study.

Skills

Each student will have worked to develop the 6 Future Ready Skills received continuous feedback from industry partners, Advisory Board members, and/or local community professionals, and be able to articulate their strengths.

Data from many sources and anecdotes from countless interviews with professionals consistently emphasizes the importance of skills that transcend any one particular field. We collaborated with MHA Labs to build on their extensive research into which specific skills are the most in-demand and best suited to help students thrive in the careers of today and tomorrow. From informational interviews to internships and many more, WBL activities focused on opportunities to build one or more of the Future Ready Skills to help students continuously expand and improve their skills. Getting feedback from employers at multiple points enables students to gain confidence and better understand where they still need to grow.

Connections

Each student will develop at least three professional connections.

Building social capital is more important than ever. A number of publications and sources note that as many as 85% of jobs are obtained through networking and that 70% or more of these positions are never advertised. It is essential for students to build strong networks in order to position themselves for success in their post-high school aspirations. Throughout their NAF academy experience, specifically work-based learning activities, students learn how to develop and sustain their social capital. Having a network will layer in an ecosystem of support, on top of a student's hard work and capabilities. WBL activities should be designed to help students intentionally build these professional relationships, so this important component is not left to chance.



Porterville USD - ODWBL in Action

Porterville, California, is a rural city located in the heart of the Central California Valley with a population of nearly 64,000. Nestled in the foothills of the Sequoia National Forest, Porterville is internationally recognized for its rich agricultural production. Within this vibrant community, Porterville Unified School District (PUSD) serves 14,475 students across grades TK-12.

PUSD operates with the mission to “Create Opportunities/Change Lives,” embodying the belief that every student possesses a unique passion and the leadership potential to achieve success. This commitment is evident in the district’s robust educational offerings, including 14 NAF academies embedded within its six high schools. These academies serve as the cornerstone of PUSD’s Pathways Program, blending rigorous academics with hands-on technical training, work-based learning, and individualized student support.

As a dedicated NAF partner since 2007, PUSD has exemplified excellence in preparing students for college, career, and life readiness. The Pathways Program aligns with NAF’s Outcomes-Driven Work-Based Learning (ODWBL) framework, supporting students in identifying career aspirations, developing Future Ready Skills, and building professional networks. Through an innovative districtwide implementation system, PUSD students complete a comprehensive sequence of work-based learning opportunities tailored to their career interests and personal growth.

Aspirations

PUSD Pathway students are supported in defining and mapping a plan for at least one career path. Through engaging WBL activities, students explore careers of interest, set actionable goals, and reflect on their growth. For example:

9th Grade Meet and Greet: Freshmen learn the importance of professional dress, etiquette, and networking in 1:1 interactions with industry professionals representing their academy’s pathway. Students present a personalized 30-second elevator pitch and exchange business cards. This initial 9th grade experience lays the inspirational foundation for students to build their personal portfolio and roadmap for the future.

Sophomore Mentors Conference: Over 900 10th graders attend this annual district-coordinated event featuring alumni MCs, keynote speakers, and breakout sessions facilitated by more than 100 local and statewide industry partners. Students engage in discussions about hiring practices, workplace effectiveness, and career trajectories, tailored to their academy themes. These activities empower students to make informed decisions about their postsecondary goals, whether they pursue higher education, enter the workforce, or pursue professional certifications.



Skills

PUSD prioritizes the development of Future Ready Skills across all Pathways programs. Students receive continuous feedback from industry professionals, advisory board members, and local community partners. The following activities highlight skill-building opportunities:

11th Grade Job Application and Interview Preparation: Juniors complete resumes, submit job applications via the district's EdJoin system - a digital job site platform and participate in formal interviews with industry professionals at a 1:2 student-to-partner ratio.

Student Reflections: After every WBL activity, students reflect on their experiences, aligning their learning with personal goals and skill development. These reflections are tied to key future-ready competencies aligned with the PUSD Graduate Outcomes that transfer to college and career readiness.

The focus on iterative skill-building ensures that students are not only prepared for their immediate goals but also equipped to adapt and thrive in an evolving workforce.

Connections

Social capital is a cornerstone of PUSD's Pathways program. By graduation, every student develops at least three professional connections, fostering a network to support their career and educational aspirations. Key initiatives include:

Networking Opportunities: Through the Meet and Greet, Mentors Conference, and other districtwide events, students engage directly with industry professionals. These interactions provide invaluable insights and open doors to internships and job opportunities.

Internships: By senior year, all students complete internships, gaining real-world experience in their chosen fields and strengthening their professional networks.

These deliberate efforts help students understand the value of networking and leverage professional relationships to pursue their goals.

PUSD's commitment to NAF's outcomes-driven approach ensures a shared sense of purpose among students, educators, and industry partners. Highlights include:

Universal Participation: All students participate in a sequence of WBL activities, ensuring consistent high-quality career preparation opportunities.

Impact by Design: Activities are intentionally designed with clear outcomes in mind, such as skill development and professional networking.

Continuous Improvement: Using individual-level data and NAF's technology tools, PUSD's 14 academies engage in a cycle of planning, implementation, and assessment to refine and enhance their programs.

PUSD Pathways sets a benchmark for effectively integrating NAF's ODWBL outcomes into a comprehensive districtwide system. By helping students define career aspirations, build critical skills, and develop professional connections, PUSD ensures that every student is prepared for a successful future. The district's innovative practices and unwavering commitment to student success demonstrate the transformative power of work-based learning.

Student Progress Towards Achieving the 3 NAF ODWBL Outcomes

Aspirations

Since 2012, the graduation rate for students in PUSD Pathways has consistently remained at 99%. Students enrolled in an academy commit to a four-year program of study that includes a sequential four-year Career Technical Education (CTE) course progression, culminating in a senior capstone course. Currently, over 70% of all high school students—totaling 4,089 across 14 academies—are enrolled in a pathway program. Enrollment is open to all students and based entirely on personal choice and interest in the academy's pathway than a screening process.

According to a senior survey from the Class of 2023, 98.5% of graduates identified at least one career path they intend to pursue post-graduation. Only 1.5% of students reported being undecided. Most graduates outlined postsecondary plans that include pathways such as two-year or four-year college programs, technical schools, the military, apprenticeships, or entering the workforce. PUSD Pathways equips students with the skills and experiences necessary to explore multiple options after graduation, ensuring they are prepared for both college and career.

Skills

All PUSD Pathways students participate in districtwide, grade-level Work-Based Learning (WBL) experiences, followed by reflective skill assessments tied to PUSD Graduate Outcomes. These reflections evaluate proficiency in Future Ready Skills and are systematically tracked in both the NAF WBL Tracker system and the district's AERIES Student Information System.

Throughout their high school journey, students receive feedback from professional partners and supervisors during activities like the 9th Grade Meet and Greet, 11th Grade Mock Interviews, and internships. These interactions provide actionable advice and opportunities to refine technical and professional skills.

Students are also required to develop and continually update a professional portfolio. This portfolio includes resume drafts, reflective pieces, and career-related artifacts collected over their four years in high school. By graduation, all students are expected to have:

- A completed resume.
- Documented portfolio reflections.
- A list of at least three professional references.

Additionally, students are encouraged to create LinkedIn profiles to extend their professional networks beyond graduation.

Connections

By the time of graduation, each student establishes an average of three professional connections. During the 2023-2024 school year, industry partners facilitated 268 guest speaking engagements and 798 job shadowing or mentoring opportunities for Pathways students in grades 9-12.

Internships are a vital component of the program:

- On average, 85% of seniors complete at least one internship.
- Some students have participated in multiple internships, with multiple students completing as many as 12 internship experiences.
- A total of 1,565 internships were completed districtwide in 2023-2024, alongside 974 Industry-Recognized Certifications and Licensures.

Industry engagement remains a cornerstone of the Pathways program, with 290 professionals contributing to key WBL activities like the 9th Grade Meet and Greet, 10th Grade Mentors Conference, and 11th Grade Mock Interviews. Additionally, individual sites host tailored WBL experiences that bring even more industry partners into the fold.

The **PUSD Pathway Alumni Network** currently includes 3,089 members. Each senior participates in an exit interview or survey prior to graduation to share feedback on their academy experience and postsecondary plans. Over 90% of graduates express a desire to remain involved with the program after graduation, contributing to mentoring efforts and WBL events.

Innovative Approaches to Internships

In a rural and remote community like Porterville, internship opportunities are sometimes limited in fields such as multimedia and performing arts. To address this, PUSD has introduced virtual WBL internships, which not only expand opportunities for students but also strengthen partnerships with industry professionals beyond the immediate region. Virtual platforms have also allowed for hybrid advisory board meetings, encouraging broader collaboration.

Postsecondary Success Metrics:

- College Enrollment: Between 93-94% of graduates report enrolling in two-year or four-year colleges.
- Certification and Employment: Many graduates earn industry-recognized certifications and enter the workforce in their chosen career fields.
- Career Path Persistence: Alumni data shows strong alignment with career pathways even three years post-graduation.

Continuous Improvement

Over the last 16 years, PUSD has continuously refined its academy offerings to align with student interests and industry workforce demands:

- The Digital Design and Communication Academy (DDC) evolved into the Computer Operations and Design Academy (CODE), shifting focus from journalism to computer programming and online design.
- The Law, Justice, and Education Academy was split into two programs—Law, Justice, and Ethics Academy and Academy of Careers in Education—to accommodate strong student interest and growing industry partnership advice.

Across all academies, course offerings and programs of study undergo regular assessment and updates based on advisory board feedback and industry advancements.

In the annual NAF High-Quality Assessment:

- 10 of the 14 academies have achieved Distinguished status.
- 2 are currently at the Model level.

PUSD employs a collaborative system for continuous improvement, with stakeholders—including site leaders, teacher teams, and advisory boards—meeting quarterly to evaluate progress and adjust goals as needed.

Conclusion

PUSD Pathways exemplifies the transformative power of the Outcomes Driven WBL approach, where high-quality work-based learning experiences prepare students for success in college, career, and life. By fostering aspirations, building essential skills, and cultivating professional connections, PUSD ensures that every student is equipped to thrive in an evolving workforce. Through continuous innovation, robust partnerships, and a commitment to improvement, PUSD sets a benchmark for educational excellence and community impact in rural districts.



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