

# Linked Learning in a Community School

Connecting to College, Career, and Community  
at the School of Business and Tourism



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## Summary

This brief profiles the School of Business and Tourism (Business and Tourism), a community school located in Los Angeles's Westlake neighborhood. It describes how the school combined two evidence-based redesign strategies, community schools and Linked Learning, with support from the Community Schools Initiative (CSI) of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The CSI's vision for community school classroom practice centers community-connected project-based learning (PBL), integration with Linked Learning, and inclusive classroom culture. At Business and Tourism, this translated into interdisciplinary PBL projects integrated into career pathways, a PBL champion, new site-based roles such as the community school coordinator, and a self-regulation space referred to as the Zen Den. Despite serving a higher-need population than the district overall, the school has outperformed LAUSD state assessments and improved its graduation rate, A-G completion, and attendance since becoming a community school. Business and Tourism's success reflects deliberate alignment between systems-level supports and school-level practice, providing a model for other districts pursuing secondary school redesign.

The report on which this brief is based can be found [here](#).

## Introduction

Though designed over a century ago to prepare students for industrial work, the factory model remains the blueprint for too many secondary schools today. High school students too often learn in depersonalized environments that were not designed for deeper learning, leaving them unprepared for 21st-century life and work.<sup>1</sup> Recent advances in the science of learning and development synthesize research across disciplines to explain how biological and environmental factors interact to shape learning. The evidence confirms that students grow and develop best in environments that nurture a sense of belonging and purpose; offer rigorous, hands-on student-centered learning; and address students' cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs.<sup>2</sup> Despite growing consensus on what secondary students need to succeed in high school and beyond, most secondary schools have remained unchanged for decades.

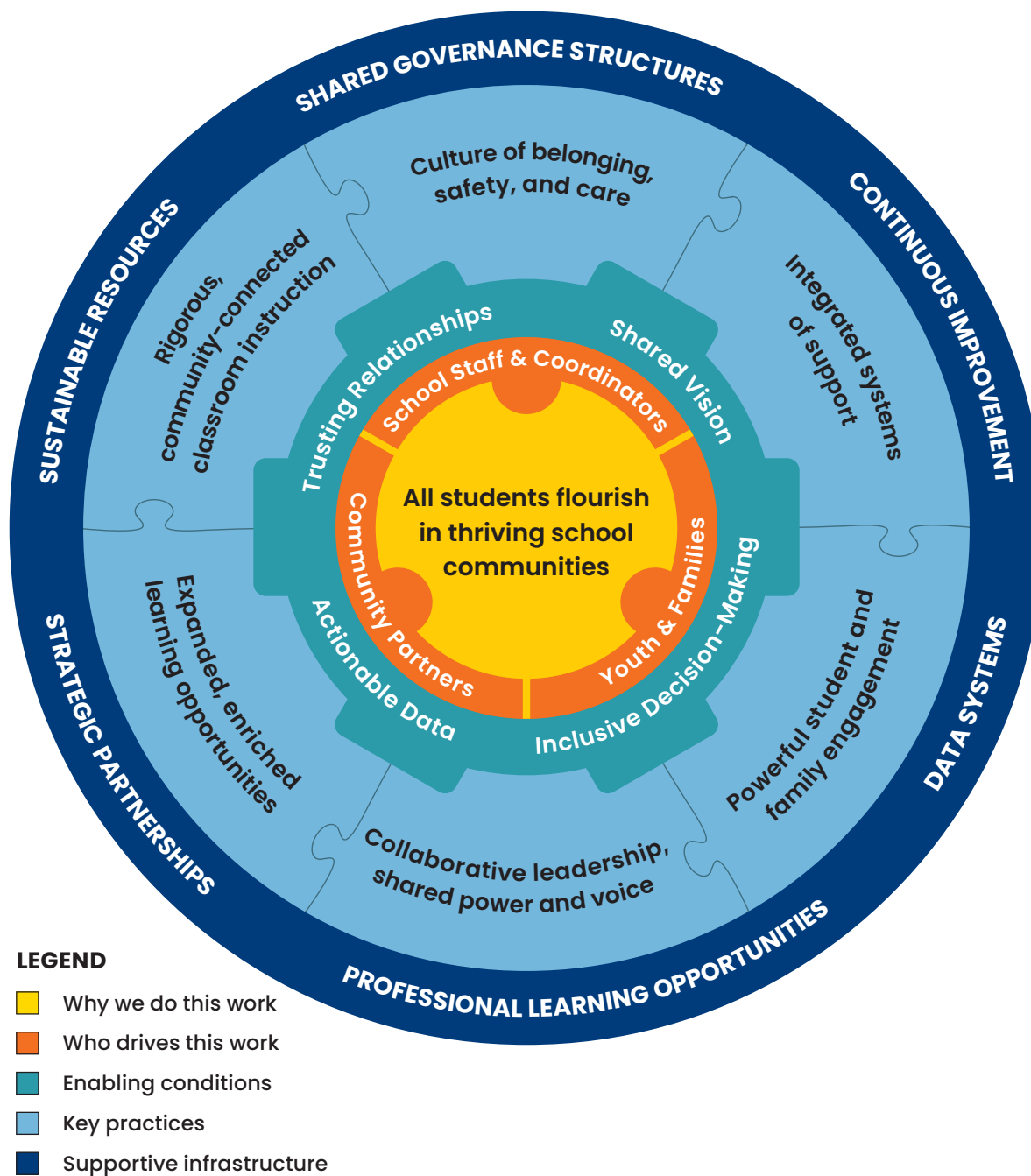
In California, two approaches to redesigning schools based on these principles, described by a CSI administrator as “sibling strategies,” have emerged, often in tandem. Linked Learning offers a model of high school redesign that creates small, industry-themed academies that prepare students for both college and careers with academic and experiential learning opportunities. These opportunities allow students to apply what they are learning in their local communities, where they undertake internships and civic engagement projects. They learn in cohorts working with teaching teams and advisory systems that ensure they are well-known and supported. Leveraged by significant state funding for career pathways, there are now more than 600 Linked Learning pathways in more than 80 districts serving more than 300,000 students in California.<sup>3</sup>

Community schools have emerged as an evidence-based school transformation strategy that takes a whole-child approach to education, bringing together students, families, educators, and community partners to expand access to the resources, supports, and opportunities that enable student success.<sup>4</sup> These can include mental-health services, meals, health care, tutoring, after-school and enrichment programming, and other services that are tailored to community needs. To deliver on this approach, community schools typically implement a set of key practices.

Early conceptualizations of the community school approach centered on four pillars of practice: integrated student supports, expanded learning time, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership. A more recent framework, *Essentials for Community School Transformation*, builds on these pillars by adding two key practices: (1) *rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction* and (2) *a culture of belonging, safety, and care*. These practices further align the community school approach with science of learning and development principles. (See [Figure 1.](#)) With the 2021 California Community Schools Partnership Program initiative that launched nearly 2,500 community schools across the state, several Linked Learning sites have become secondary community schools, joining the two powerful concepts together.

This brief traces how these practices took root at Business and Tourism, a Linked Learning high school participating in CSI in LAUSD.

**Figure 1. Essentials for Community School Transformation**



Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation*.

## School of Business and Tourism

Business and Tourism is a small high school situated on the Miguel Contreras Learning Complex campus in Los Angeles’s Westlake neighborhood—an area known for its rich cultural and ethnic diversity. It was founded in 2006 and served just under 400 students in 2025–26. A significant share of students are English learners (25.6%), and nearly all students are socioeconomically disadvantaged (99.7%)—percentages that substantially exceed district averages. Almost 8% of students at Business and Tourism experience homelessness, and approximately 10% receive special education services.<sup>5</sup>

Business and Tourism is a long-standing pilot school within LAUSD’s Public School Choice initiative, a program that sought to drive school improvement and success by creating new and innovative schools while relieving overcrowding. As a pilot school, Business and Tourism gained flexibilities that allowed it to establish a teacher-led, student-centered learning environment. This environment is anchored by Linked Learning pathways that integrate PBL with real-world applications.

The school’s Linked Learning pathways seek to develop students’ academic skills and career preparedness in line with its focus on the business and tourism industries. Ninth- and 10th-graders participate in the Hospitality, Recreation, and Tourism pathway, and 11th- and 12th-graders participate in the Marketing, Sales, and Service pathway. Notably, the Marketing, Sales, and Service pathway has earned a Gold Certification from the Linked Learning Alliance, the highest distinction awarded to pathways that provide strong cross-subject integration, equitable student supports, and meaningful career and postsecondary learning experiences, as assessed through an independent review process.<sup>6</sup>

In 2022–23, Business and Tourism became a designated community school within LAUSD’s CSI, which now supports 70 schools that serve the highest-need students. Students enrolled in LAUSD schools that were early adopters of the strategy have made greater academic gains compared to similar, non-community schools within the district.<sup>7</sup> These outcome gains began at the outset of the community school initiative and have accelerated with the addition of state investments, which have amplified and sustained local efforts.<sup>8</sup>

In becoming a community school, Business and Tourism has expanded counseling, mental-health supports, and enrichment activities to meet student and family needs. Participation in the community school initiative allowed the school to strengthen its instructional programming and add a community school coordinator. The coordinator supports Linked Learning by overseeing the school’s industry advisory board and coordinating activities that enrich pathway instruction.

## A Systems-Level Vision for Inclusive, Deeper Learning

LAUSD community schools, including Business and Tourism, are supported by a systems-level infrastructure that was designed to enable high-quality implementation. At the heart of this infrastructure is an understanding that providing additional services, programs, partnerships, and personnel to schools is not an end in itself. Instead, they are resources that serve a larger goal of strengthening instruction and improving academic outcomes. As the CSI director put it, community schools are “first and foremost about strong Tier 1 instruction [instructional approaches for all students].” Accordingly, LAUSD’s CSI centers its strategy for transforming schools around classroom practice, coalescing its vision around three priorities: community-connected PBL, the integration of Linked Learning and community school approaches in high schools, and the development of welcoming and inclusive classrooms through social-emotional learning and restorative practices.

Community-connected PBL sits at the core of this vision. As a CSI administrator explained, PBL is “a signature element that defines a community school classroom.” CSI staff widely agreed that this approach, grounded in real-world connections and student agency, is essential for making learning engaging, meaningful, and student-centered. The CSI centers professional learning efforts around this belief and partners with two external providers to deliver training, coaching, professional learning communities, and an online library of PBL units and lesson plans. The goal of these professional learning opportunities is to train teachers across the district in interdisciplinary, project-based approaches meant to help students see their coursework as genuinely relevant to their own lives. To further build this capacity across its network of community schools, the CSI also created a “PBL champion” role. Each community school designates a teacher as its PBL champion, with a stipend from the CSI, to serve as a key point of contact for CSI staff and a collaborator with colleagues. Additionally, the CSI funds pay for teacher collaboration time, providing compensation for teachers who are engaged in interdisciplinary PBL planning.

To bring the CSI’s commitment to inclusive, deeper-learning practices to life, LAUSD houses the CSI Department in the district’s Division of Instruction, enabling officials within the CSI Department to collaborate closely with other instructional teams to build a shared understanding of the alignment between their missions and goals. For example, the CSI has worked closely with LAUSD’s Linked Learning Department to leverage the natural synergy between the two approaches. Staff from both departments pointed to significant overlap in their underlying priorities, particularly a shared emphasis on community connection and PBL. Collaboration between the CSI and the Linked Learning/Career Technical Education Department has produced several practical efforts to integrate the two departments’ work. For instance, the CSI created a district-level secondary specialist position that serves as a systems-level strategist, an on-the-ground facilitator, and a liaison between the two departments. Working directly with school sites and interdepartmental colleagues, this role bridges CSI’s vision and school-site realities to advance postsecondary pathways and college and career readiness across community schools. The two departments have also jointly funded school-level positions, including a work-based learning coordinator, who focuses on building industry partnerships and expanding real-world learning opportunities for students in community schools. In addition, the departments have jointly produced implementation guidance for community schools seeking to simultaneously grow the community school strategy along with Linked Learning pathways. This guidance aims to streamline implementation and onboarding processes between the two initiatives.

Finally, the CSI has prioritized the development of welcoming and inclusive classrooms, aiming to move away from a rigid factory model of schooling toward spaces grounded in anti-racist and restorative principles. As conceived by the district’s CSI, welcoming and inclusive classrooms nurture positive interactions among students, their peers, and their teachers; support students to feel emotionally and physically safe; and reflect students’ identities and experiences. To build the capacity of educators to create welcoming and inclusive environments for students, the CSI offered two professional development series delivered by Joyful Disruption, an external partner. The trainings were designed to help teachers recognize and interrupt the ways systemic racism and discrimination surface in curricula and classrooms, equipping educators, as the CSI newsletter described, to “recognize, problematize, and disrupt the deep structures of schooling.” An additional external partner, Sandy Hook Promise, provided a series of trainings focused on building welcoming environments, supporting students’ social-emotional growth and peer relationships, and preventing isolation and violence.

# Putting the Systems-Level Vision Into Practice

The systems-level support developed by the CSI has strengthened classroom practice at Business and Tourism. By providing training on PBL and integrating Linked Learning into the community school approaches, students have enhanced opportunities to engage with content in meaningful ways. Additionally, district support for the development of welcoming and inclusive classrooms nurtures the school-level conditions for instructional approaches to take hold.

## Community-Connected Project-Based Learning

Business and Tourism, a pilot school since 2013, has built its entire instructional model around Linked Learning pathways that integrate PBL with career preparation. In each grade, students engage in two major interdisciplinary projects per year—one per semester—which culminate in student portfolio presentations to a panel of judges composed of teachers, community members, and industry professionals. (See [Culminating Presentations for 9th-Grade Team Projects](#).)

Educators meet twice a week for professional development and grade-level team planning focused on PBL activities that are related to Linked Learning pathway themes. Educators described Business and Tourism as “a teacher-led school” in which “every teacher is involved in Linked Learning and project-based learning.” They have two weekly professional development blocks built into the school schedule for project design, rubric development, and planning for differentiated supports.

PBL was an established instructional approach at Business and Tourism before it became a community school, and several of the systems-level supports described above have reinforced the school’s ability to provide an instructional program centered around PBL. Because PBL is deeply established at the school, Business and Tourism did not send a large contingent of staff to professional development opportunities offered by the CSI, which were intended to support schools with a novice orientation to PBL. However, Business and Tourism did send an educator representative to take part in CSI-offered trainings in order to ensure that their instructional approaches were in alignment with CSI’s vision and to identify new resources to strengthen ongoing practice.

Additionally, Business and Tourism now has a dedicated PBL champion who receives a stipend via community school funding. This champion is a veteran teacher leader who has helped sustain the school’s commitment to PBL for more than a decade, protecting and deepening PBL practice on site. She builds buy-in among administrators, teachers, and students; inducts new teachers by placing them strategically on grade-level teams; helps colleagues adapt projects for diverse learners, including English learners; and recruits community and industry professionals to serve as project judges, keeping student work connected to real-world standards.

Classroom projects at Business and Tourism reflect the cross-disciplinary, community-connected PBL instruction that the CSI envisions for community schools. In one 10th-grade project, students designed an eco-friendly hotel, drawing on history and geography to situate their designs, creating scaled architectural blueprints in math, and studying persuasive rhetoric in English to produce commercials. This project culminated in Shark Tank–style pitches to a panel of judges. In a 9th-grade project, student teams researched a Los Angeles County neighborhood and—dressed in professional attire—presented tourism proposals that applied claim-evidence-reasoning and marketing concepts to panels that included

teachers, staff, and outside industry professionals. Students described the PBL approach as demanding but valuable. One reflected that although they “hated it at first,” the process taught practical skills such as interviewing and resume writing, while another noted that working in teams and communicating with others prepares students for future jobs and careers.

## **Culminating Presentations for 9th-Grade Team Projects**

On a rare rainy day in May 2025, 9th-graders at Business and Tourism gathered in the campus’s two-story library to present a semester-long group project on a Los Angeles County neighborhood. This annual assignment asked student teams to research a neighborhood and draw on concepts from across their classes to create a presentation encouraging tourism.

After weeks preparing slides and rehearsing in class and advisory, teams arrived in professional attire—a strategy taught at Business and Tourism to support effective communication and presentation—for their scheduled slot before a panel of four judges: 9th-grade teachers, other staff (including the principal), and an industry professional.

One team presented on Pasadena and Altadena. After greeting the judges, they moved through their 4–5-minute presentation, covering the cities’ history and culture. They applied claim-evidence-reasoning to discuss climate challenges following the 2025 Eaton fire and showcased a marketing project: a new city logo and a food truck concept celebrating local culture while offering healthy options. Every student spoke, demonstrating command of the material.

A Q&A followed, with judges asking clarifying questions (e.g., “Why did you design the logo that way?”) before offering feedback on both content mastery and presentation skills. Judges then scored the group using a shared rubric before the next team presented.

These presentations reflect Business and Tourism’s rigorous, cross-disciplinary, community-connected model: Students synthesize learning across subjects, present to an authentic panel, and receive feedback supporting both academic and professional growth.

Source: Learning Policy Institute site visit observation at the School of Business and Tourism. (2025, May 7).

## **Integration of Linked Learning and Community School Approaches**

At the school level, the CSI’s investment in aligning Linked Learning and community schools is most visible in two roles: the jointly funded work-based learning coordinator and the community school coordinator (CSC), whose position supports Linked Learning instruction.

The work-based learning coordinator, who is shared across several schools but visits Business and Tourism weekly, supports building the industry partnerships that anchor pathway instruction. For example, the CSC at Business and Tourism described the work-based learning coordinator’s contributions to the 10th-grade team, which participates in the Hospitality, Recreation, and Tourism pathway:

She’s super helpful for our 10th-grade team, and she’s really helpful at reaching out and making connections. And so, we had a field trip to the Ritz-Carlton at LA Live, and she brought in the general manager, and then he’s connected to Cal Poly Pomona School of Hospitality Management. So, part of her job is making all of these connections and then sharing those opportunities with us.

The CSC also noted that, as an out-of-classroom employee, she is well-positioned to support the work-based learning coordinator by regularly checking in with teachers to understand the types of field trips and opportunities they hope to incorporate to enrich their pathway instruction.

The CSC's role was shaped directly by data from the school's assets and needs assessment, a process through which coordinators gather input from students, families, and staff to inform community school implementation. Those data showed that students and parents were overwhelmingly asking for career exploration, work-based learning, and internship opportunities, while teachers reported lacking the time to arrange them. As the CSC explained, her job at a Linked Learning school is accordingly "very much in support of the instructional program": finding internships, cultivating external partnerships, and taking on the logistical work of enrichment activities that teachers cannot easily absorb into their own schedules. She attends all of the school's professional development sessions specifically to stay available to teachers, who described her support as central to their day-to-day work, from sourcing classroom materials to accompanying students on field trips.

The CSC also helps coordinate real-world learning opportunities directly. For example, she arranged visits to the Career Academy, hosted at the Los Angeles Convention Center, for 12th-graders. These industry-specific events gave students direct access to professionals in tourism and other career pathways. In addition, she works alongside the work-based learning coordinator, the PBL champion, and the principal to oversee and manage Business and Tourism's advisory board, which includes roughly ten community members, alumni, and industry professionals who support the school's instructional program. Keeping the board updated on students' interdisciplinary projects allows its members to contribute partnership connections and to serve as judges for end-of-semester portfolio presentations.

## **Culture of Safety, Belonging, and Care**

In keeping with the CSI's vision, Business and Tourism took advantage of the capacity-building opportunities the CSI offered to help school staff enact welcoming, inclusive classroom practices, creating the necessary conditions for all of the instructional approaches to take hold with students. Additionally, Business and Tourism partnered with LAUSD's Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports/Restorative Practices (PBIS/RP) team to deliver an on-campus training in social-emotional learning foundations, reaching 28 staff members, including two administrators, six support staff, and 22 educators.

Building on these learning opportunities, Business and Tourism made several changes to school and classroom practice. For example, since the Joyful Disruption series emphasized the physical environment in which students learn, participants took part in activities that were designed to help them reflect on the inclusivity of their own classroom spaces. Inspired by this training, Business and Tourism created a space where students could process their emotions, take time for reflection, or simply relax in a calm, safe setting. This space, known as the Zen Den, is housed in the CSC's office and was created using community school funding. It includes several cushioned chairs and a table, along with a poster outlining guidelines for how students can use the space. It offers a range of materials for engagement, including journals, drawing and painting supplies, and tactile materials such as sculpting clay. The Zen Den also features a wall display of affirming messages, such as "you are enough" and "you are beautiful."

District-offered trainings prompted the school to adopt several other inclusive practices. The Business and Tourism principal affirmed her alignment with CSI's commitment to inclusive practice, sharing that "having that underpinning of belongingness and inclusivity is very important" and noting that community schools' training sessions "really help to affirm that and [provide] inclusive strategies that help bring community within your school, within your classroom." She described several classroom practices—taught via CSI trainings—that school educators adopted, including social-emotional check-ins, small-group learning stations, community-building circles in which students shared stories about their lives, and gender-affirming language.

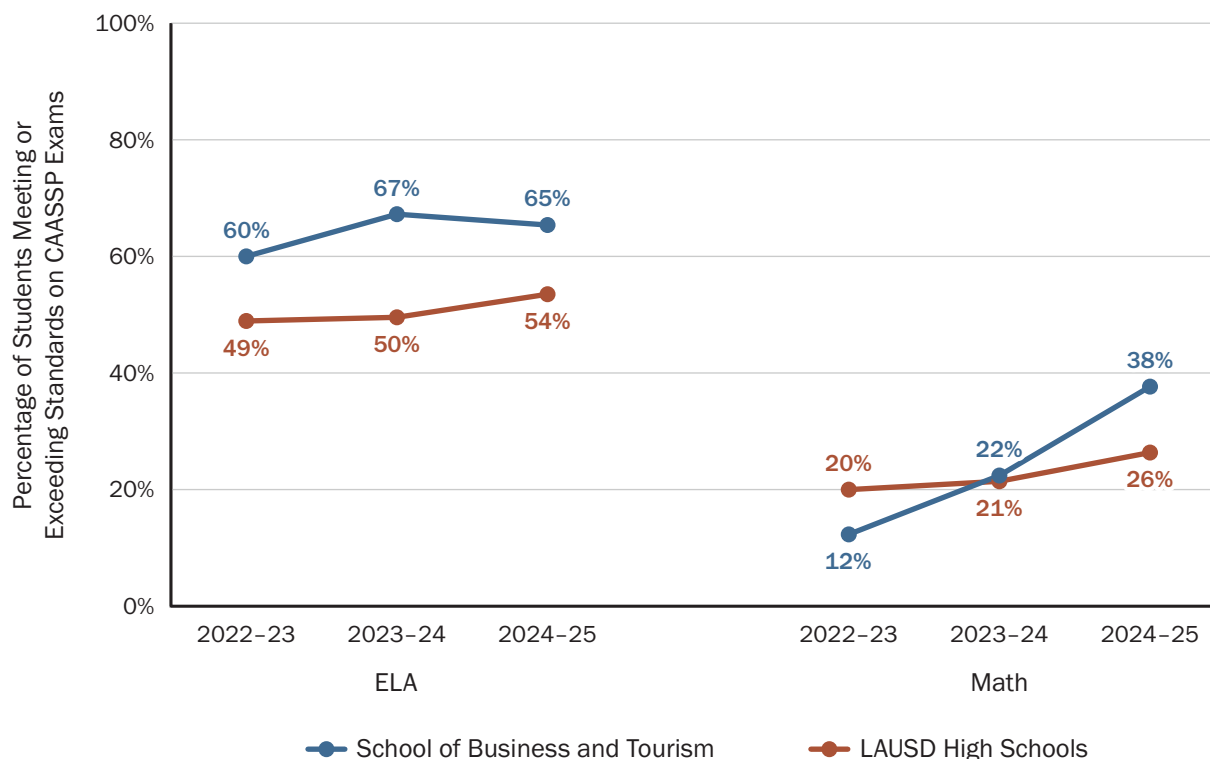
The CSC described several additional helpful tools and strategies educators learned during trainings on social-emotional learning foundations: "The PBIS and RP team, they do PDs for us on Tuesdays, and they've shared different strategies for how to build connection with students and how to de-escalate conflicts in the classroom. There is one [strategy] I always remember called Four to One: For every correction you do, students should hear four affirming things." Business and Tourism also engaged parents and caregivers in learning opportunities from the PBIS/RP team, focused on understanding and naming emotions, stress management, adolescent development, and strategies for communicating with teenage children.

## **Student Success at Business and Tourism**

The sustained focus on integrated PBL via Linked Learning pathways has made Business and Tourism a place where students are not just prepared to graduate but also equipped to navigate postsecondary education and career opportunities. Many of the school's student outcomes reflect this level of student success.

Despite having greater concentrations of English learners, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and students experiencing homelessness, Business and Tourism has outperformed the district on state assessments. In 2024–25, 65.4% of 11th-graders met or exceeded the English language arts proficiency standard, nearly 12 percentage points above the LAUSD average for 11th graders. Math scores have also improved rapidly since 2022–23, with 37.7% of students now meeting or exceeding the proficiency standard, about 11 percentage points above the district average. (See [Figure 2](#).)

**Figure 2. School of Business and Tourism and LAUSD High Schools ELA and Math Proficiency, 2022–23 to 2024–25**



Notes: CAASPP = California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress; ELA = English language arts; LAUSD = Los Angeles Unified School District. CAASPP results for LAUSD include charter and noncharter schools.

Source: California Department of Education [DataQuest](#) data for 2022–23 through 2024–25 for the School of Business and Tourism and the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Business and Tourism also enables its students to make gains in college and career readiness. For instance, students at Business and Tourism have made steady progress in meeting California’s A-G requirements—a series of college preparatory courses that students must pass with a grade of C or better to be eligible for admission to California’s public university system. In 2024–25, approximately 72.4% of Business and Tourism students satisfied these requirements, an increase of over 18 percentage points since it became a designated community school in 2021–22. This puts the school on par with the district average and far above the state average of 53.9%. Additionally, the school has achieved a 76.3% graduation rate in the 2024–25 school year, which is an almost 8-percentage-point increase since 2021–22.<sup>9</sup>

Business and Tourism’s deliberate efforts to improve student engagement and school culture have also contributed to improvements in school attendance, suspension rates, and school climate assessments. The high school has reduced chronic absence in recent years, decreasing its rate by almost 10 percentage points since its pandemic-induced peak in 2021–22. Suspension rates at Business and Tourism have also remained significantly low and barely veered from 0% over 4 of the last 5 years, indicating the

presence of a positive school climate. Furthermore, student survey results from 2024–25 indicate that two thirds of students (64%) feel that the school is a supportive and inviting place for students to learn, that adults at the school treat students with respect (65%), and that teachers are responsive to reports of student bullying (64%). These survey results generally mirror the average ratings of LAUSD high schoolers on those measures.

## A Model for Secondary School Redesign

Business and Tourism illustrates that a community school can successfully take on the key practices outlined in the Essentials Framework, which build on the original four pillars of community school implementation and add two more: *rigorous community-connected instruction* and a *culture of belonging, safety, and care*. Business and Tourism’s success is not simply a function of CSI funding—rather, it reflects that the school deliberately aligned systems-level infrastructure (e.g., professional learning opportunities, PBL champion stipends, and joint CSI/Linked Learning positions such as the work-based learning coordinator) with an instructional foundation of Linked Learning pathways and PBL practice. This alignment reinforced the CSI’s vision for classroom culture and instruction.

Many of the school’s student outcomes are consistent with this alignment between systems-level supports and their uptake at the school level. Despite serving a higher-need population than the district average, Business and Tourism outperformed LAUSD on English language arts and math proficiency and has seen improved graduation rates and attendance since becoming a community school. Because secondary schools have historically struggled to implement inclusive, deeper-learning practices, Business and Tourism offers an instructive model for other community schools and districts seeking to redesign secondary schools to meet the needs of 21st-century learners.

## Endnotes

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