

Performance Assessment Profile: Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)

By Maya Kaul

The room is dark, apart from the glow of the PowerPoint presentation, and 12th grade student Erika¹ stands in professional attire in the front of the room with a stack of note cards in her hand. Before her sit the three members of her senior defense panel: her English teacher, a school counselor, and a community member. About a half dozen other seats are filled with external observers, and to one side sits Erika's friend, who is there to offer support.

Erika is here to demonstrate why and how she has achieved the Los Angeles High School of the Arts (LAHSA) graduation competencies: art, communication, critical thinking, collaboration, citizenship, and forward thinking.

She begins her senior defense by sharing her plans to study nursing and minor in screenwriting after high school, and then delves into her presentation, beginning with a discussion of her first artifact—a light set design for a school play that served as her 12th grade design project. For each of her three artifacts, Erika walks the audience through the assigned task, her goals, and the skills she was able to hone, all while using the PowerPoint presentation to share evidence of her learning and growth.

When sharing her 12th grade English class narrative assignment—a retrospective examination of her own life struggles and the fragility of life—Erika discusses the literary tools she applied and reflects on her creative process and areas of creative growth. She employs annotated excerpts from her writing to point out different techniques she used for the assignment and to demonstrate how she captured the reader's attention. Throughout her presentation, she embeds reflections on her personal growth throughout high school.

After the panel engages in the question-and-answer session, which typically allows for panelists to push a student's thinking or help students answer something they missed during the presentation, the time comes for Erika to exit the room and for the panelists' deliberation to begin. The facilitating panelist asks the others if they have read her retrospective narrative and shares that it was the best narrative she has read from her students all year.

Another panelist responds, "Yes, I cried."

The panelists continue with the deliberation process—working through the rubric, domain by domain, before all agreeing that this is the most advanced defense they have witnessed all year. The panelists discuss how the central thesis of Erika's narrative assignment provides evidence of metacognition, and how her presentation skills revealed that she not only had a strong command of the room, but was also "someone who was connected to her own process of growth." The main area for improvement they identify for Erika is to better manage her time during oral presentations.

Upon completing the deliberation process, the panelists invite Erika back into the room and share their feedback and the good news: She passed her 12th grade portfolio defense and will be graduating that spring.²

Erika’s senior defense experience is emblematic of the depth of learning, personal growth, and college preparation that the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) strives for students to experience in the district’s emerging performance assessment system. Performance assessments, such as the portfolio/defense model, place an emphasis on assessing higher-order thinking skills, driving high-quality instruction, and supporting the development of deep content knowledge in order to support 21st century learning outcomes. Erika’s experience serves as a model for how such assessments can shift curricula toward more meaningful content and instructional practices that directly encourage students to think critically about how their schoolwork is connected to their postgraduation plans and their own identities. The central question LAUSD asks students to answer through the portfolio/defense system is, “How am I prepared for college, career, and life?”³

Background on Los Angeles Unified

LAUSD is one of the largest school districts in the United States, second only to that of New York City. The district spans more than 720 square miles, reaching portions of 31 smaller municipalities beyond the city of Los Angeles, and includes more than 600,000 students (Figure 1).⁴ Of these students, 74% are Latinx, with the remainder of the student population comprising primarily White, African American, Asian, Filipinx, and Pacific Islander students. There is a high percentage of students from low-income families enrolled in the district, with nearly 80% of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch—21% above the statewide level (Figure 1).⁵

Figure 1: Los Angeles Unified School District at a Glance (2016–17)

Student Enrollment	633,621
Schools	1,017
Race/Ethnicityⁱ	74% Latinx 8% African American 10% White 6% Asian, Filipinx, or Pacific Islander 2% Other
Students from Low-Income Familiesⁱⁱ	79%
English Learnersⁱⁱⁱ	25%

i Totals may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
 ii Percentage of students who qualified for a free and reduced-price meal in 2016–17.
 iii Does not include English Learners who have been reclassified as “fluent English proficient.”

Source: California Department of Education DataQuest

The focus of the district’s *Strategic Plan for 2016–2019* is to “direct its efforts and resources to recruit, develop and support principals and teachers in creating a learning environment that ensures 100% of students achieve and graduate.”⁶ In 2016–17, LAUSD reached a 77% cohort graduation rate—up from 72% in 2016, and 70% in 2014.⁷ However, these rates remain below the 2016–17 statewide graduation rate of 83%.⁸ Beyond the graduation rate, the district does report higher levels of achievement compared with state averages in its Smarter Balanced Assessment results and completion rates of A-G course requirements for UC/CSU admission.⁹

Historical Context of Performance Assessments in Los Angeles Unified

The landscape of performance assessments in LAUSD today has been shaped by the work carried out over the past decade by the **Linked Learning District Initiative** (henceforth, “the initiative”). Launched in 2009 by the James Irvine Foundation, the initiative was originally piloted in nine districts across California. The Linked Learning model is designed to prepare college- and career-ready high school graduates through a high-quality program of study that integrates a college preparatory curriculum with a rigorous career technical education sequence and work-based learning opportunities. To date, the Linked Learning approach has expanded to [more than 100 school districts in California](#).

The initiative was formally introduced to LAUSD in March 2010 through funding administered by [ConnectEd](#)—a technical assistance partner that provides professional supports to schools and districts—and has since been led by the [LAUSD Linked Learning Office](#). The hallmark of the Linked Learning approach is its **pathways**: industry-themed programs of study designed to ensure students have the academic and technical skill proficiencies to be college- and career- ready upon graduation.¹⁰

Each of the [LAUSD Linked Learning pathways](#) falls into one of the following 11 industry sectors:¹¹

1. Agriculture and Natural Resources
2. Arts, Media, and Entertainment
3. Business and Finance
4. Education, Child Development, and Family Services
5. Energy, Environment, and Utilities
6. Engineering and Architecture
7. Health Science and Medical Technology
8. Hospitality, Tourism, and Recreation
9. Information and Communication Technology
10. Public Services
11. Middle and Elementary Linked Learning Schools

The pathways are structured to allow teachers to collaborate on their curricula across disciplines and to supplement that coursework with work-based learning opportunities provided by industry partners.¹² Project-based learning is central to the pathways because it provides a means of implementing integrated projects across disciplines. Project-based learning also provides students with an opportunity to connect their work with career and technical education—for example, all schools in Linked Learning already require students in 9th through 12th grade to present their projects to representatives from their chosen industry twice a year.¹³

Accordingly, the performance assessment system that has emerged in the district is a natural complement to Linked Learning pathways to prepare college- and career-ready graduates. Though several pathways were already implementing performance assessments independently, the Linked Learning team committed to intentionally scaling such assessments across all pathways during the 2014–15 school year, when a group of LAUSD teachers and principals visited [Envision Academy of Arts and Technology \(EA\)](#) in Oakland and observed its portfolio/defense model.¹⁴

This visit provided the impetus and the initial staff buy-in for the district’s Linked Learning office to adopt the portfolio/defense model as part of its broader program-wide strategy. To achieve this, the district’s Linked Learning team designed its portfolio/defense model to build off of existing curricula. Students are encouraged to include assignments they complete as a part of Linked Learning’s project-based curriculum in their portfolios. In this system, the portfolio/defense serves as a natural culmination of the high school experience for 12th grade students.

To date, 34 of the district’s 54 pathways¹⁵ implement the portfolio/defense model, and the district is working to expand the model to the remaining 20 Linked Learning pathways. During the 2017–18 academic year, about 3,000 12th grade students and 75 pathway leaders and other educators were involved in pathways that have performance assessments, and representatives from 10 non-Linked Learning schools participated in a professional development session focused on the portfolio/defense process.¹⁶

How the Portfolio and Defense System Works

All LAUSD Linked Learning pathway schools orient their work to meet the following “Theory of Action”:¹⁷

- Define a **graduate profile** for the learner.
- Design a **performance assessment** that measures that graduate profile.
- Implement **pedagogies** and **school structures** that lead to success on that performance assessment.

The portfolio/defense framework for performance assessment requires participating students to curate a collection of their pathway work into a portfolio and then defend that work through an oral presentation to a panel of teachers, administrators, and local community members. The district provides [guidance to schools on how to calibrate panelists](#) before they serve on a graduate portfolio panel, though these practices are still being aligned across pathways. Some schools offer calibration sessions in the evenings. Others offer online training or in-person training on the day of senior defenses.¹⁸

The [LAUSD Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18](#) provides a more comprehensive guide to this system to supplement the overview provided below. Additionally, the Linked Learning district team has created separate comprehensive websites to guide [staff](#) and [students](#) through the portfolio/defense process. This is an example of how districts can create resources to standardize implementation of performance assessment systems districtwide.

The Portfolio

Each student develops a graduation portfolio containing 10 **artifacts**—selected student work (such as essays, art projects, science labs, etc.)—accompanied by a graded rubric of their assignment to demonstrate that they have achieved pathway and district outcomes. The pathways vary in the structures of the portfolios, although the district recommends organizing the artifacts into three categories, as seen in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Senior Portfolio Example

Academic Preparedness

1. **Analysis** (e.g., historical research paper, literary analysis essay, science lab, etc.)
 2. **Argument** (i.e., science-based editorial, economics argument paper, speech on a current event, etc.)
 3. **Problem-Solving** (e.g., long-form mathematics problem, theater set design proposal)
-

Work Readiness

4. **Professional Résumé**
 5. **Job Application**
 6. **Mock Interview** (e.g., rubric accompanied by a picture and/or reflection)
-

Personal Accomplishments

7. **Growth Over Time** (students are asked to select one of the *Academic Preparedness* competencies to demonstrate their growth over time by comparing at least two artifacts in different years)
 8. **Personal Statement**
 9. **Community Engagement**
 10. **Pathway-Specific Student Accomplishment** (revealing present accomplishments and future promise)
-

Sources: LAUSD Linked Learning. (n.d.). Portfolio artifacts. <http://lausdportfoliodefense.weebly.com/portfolio-artifacts.html> (accessed 09/24/2018); Personal email with Nancy Le, LAUSD Linked Learning Technical Coach (2018, September 18).

Some pathways provide students with templates for digital portfolios. To see examples of LAUSD digital student portfolios, see [here](#).

Regardless of the particular portfolio format employed, students are expected to provide a written reflection on each of their artifacts, addressing the following prompts:

- **Introduce and contextualize the artifact.** Where does it come from? How did you create it? Why did you choose it?
- **Analyze the artifact.** Explain in detail how it represents a competency (analysis, problem-solving, community engagement, etc.) and a pathway learning outcome.
- **Reflect on your understanding of that competency.** How have you grown in your ability to demonstrate this competency? What progress do you still need to make? How does this artifact connect with life outside of school and your future?

Though there is some variation in when a student in an LAUSD pathway first engages in work related to their portfolio, the district's Linked Learning office advises all pathways to start guiding students through the performance assessment process early in high school. They also suggest assigning interdisciplinary, project-based assignments focused on career and technical information at least twice a year, starting in 9th grade.¹⁹ Figure 3 provides an example of how a pathway might help students build a collection of artifacts.

Figure 3. Portfolio Artifact Metric Example

	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade
College Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis • Argument • Problem-solving • Inquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis • Argument • Problem-solving • Inquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis • Argument • Problem-solving • Inquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis • Argument • Problem-solving • Inquiry
Work Readiness		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Résumé 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Résumé (revised) • Job application • Mock interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Résumé (revised)
Personal Accomplishments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement • Student accomplishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement • Student accomplishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement • Student accomplishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement • Student accomplishment • Personal statement
Total # of Artifacts	6	7	9	8
Total # of Artifacts by Spring Semester Preparation for Senior Defense	28 (résumé is counted once)			

Source: LAUSD Linked Learning. (2017). *Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18: A Guide for LAUSD Linked Learning Pathways*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.

In some schools, the portfolio/defense model has been integrated into curricula as early as middle school. For example, students in Nightingale Middle School’s Gifted STEM Magnet program complete a 5-week unit that features a [mini portfolio/defense model](#). The portfolio-building process is scaffolded in this way so that the portfolio/defense exercise informs the instruction students receive over time, rather than being an isolated experience that they may or may not be prepared to engage in meaningfully.

The LAUSD Linked Learning office also suggests that students be guided through the process of selecting work to include in their portfolio once a year throughout high school. Advisory—a regularly scheduled class time during which teachers offer academic and nonacademic guidance to a small community of students—is a critical structure of support in LAUSD’s performance assessment system because it provides students with the time and space to work on and receive feedback on their portfolio/defense work. The final portfolio that students put together in 12th grade is composed of artifacts generated throughout their high school careers that they have identified as exemplars of their college- and career-readiness. The district’s Linked Learning office recommends that once a student has selected the artifacts they would like to include in their portfolio, content area teachers review the work to determine whether it reflects the proficiency necessary for inclusion in the final portfolio. At the end of this process, a student’s advisory teacher then determines whether the portfolio is complete.²⁰

Alongside the shifts in student assessment, LAUSD’s portfolio/defense model supports shifts in how teachers develop and implement performance tasks for students to engage with subject-related content knowledge. **Performance tasks** are hands-on assignments such as science labs or research papers that allow students to demonstrate mastery of a skill and/or content area and provide tangible evidence of

their learning. The district is currently piloting a common task within selected pathways, with the goal of eventually scaling such tasks across pathways to ensure consistency in the quality and content of student learning.²¹ In light of research indicating that tasks that yield consistent and meaningful results require strong review, field testing, and rubrics,²² ConnectEd has developed a [Performance Assessment Rubric](#) to facilitate the development of high-quality tasks in LAUSD. This rubric is grounded in a large body of research from organizations and networks such as [Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity \(SCALE\)](#), [Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education \(SCOPE\)](#), and the [Center for Collaborative Education](#). For example, the rubric draws on research from SCALE that aligns Common Core instruction with assessments that measure students’ mastery of core subjects and higher-order skills.²³

For example, in the “Alignment to Standards” section of the [Quality Criteria for Performance Assessments](#) checklist that the Linked Learning district office provides pathway staff to help them design their own performance tasks, there is an evident emphasis on meeting particular content standards:

Quality Criteria	Yes	No	Rationale/Suggestions
a. Does the task measure key skills and major claims emphasized by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Mathematics Practices, C3, and/or Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)?*			
b. Could students’ responses to this task (what students are asked to produce) be scored using vetted rubrics?*			
c. Are the scoring criteria—rubrics, point scoring systems, checklists—aligned to key expectations of the CCSS/C3/NGSS?			

*nonnegotiable task elements

Using these quality criteria, pathways develop their own performance tasks aimed at helping students achieve district and pathway outcomes. For example, the Digital Media Art pathway at the School for the Visual Arts and Humanities has designed an [interdisciplinary project lesson plan](#) titled “American Narratives: What is the Story Behind the Story?” The project encourages students to think critically about topics in American history, literature, and art, and to learn about potential professions they could pursue in those fields. The following selection from the lesson plan highlights how teachers can develop content-driven performance tasks to augment instruction and student learning within their own pathways:

Guiding Elements

Essential/Driving Question

Rooted in real-world application

To what extent does an individual's ability to understand the past and critique the present help them create innovative art? What role could such art play in transforming American Narratives?

Project Description

Summary of the challenge, investigation, scenario, problem or issue

Throughout American history, simple, memorable images have been used to justify the dominance and entitlement of an expanding nation. Students will interrogate the motives and the timing of these images to understand the meaning and purpose of these Master Narratives.

Students will select an iconic image from American history, research its history, and mount a written and an artistic critique. The critique will inform the creation of a new image that gives voice to lost or ignored stories of marginalized communities, correcting stories that were falsified to fit a Eurocentric, capitalist narrative, or an aspirational vision for the US. Students will then curate an exhibition that presents the student work alongside the original art pieces.

Standards

Core Disciplines, CTE, SEL
Use language not numbers

American Literature/Contemporary Composition:

U.S. History:

Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View

4. Students distinguish valid arguments from fallacious arguments in historical interpretations.
5. Students identify bias and prejudice in historical interpretations.
6. Students evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past, including an analysis of authors' use of evidence and the distinctions between sound generalizations and misleading oversimplifications.
7. Students construct and test hypotheses; collect, evaluate, and employ information from multiple primary and secondary sources; and apply it in oral and written presentations.

Historical Interpretation

8. Students show the connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments.
9. Students recognize the complexity of historical causes and effects, including the limitations on determining cause and effect.
10. Students interpret past events and issues within the context in which an event unfolded rather than solely in terms of present-day norms and values.

Art—Adobe Suite (Photoshop, Illustrator, etc.)

Work-Based Learning (WBL) Connections

Students visited the Autry National Museum and were led through a daylong interaction with art historians, educators, and curators. At the museum they were able to take a behind-the-scenes look at the process of creating, critiquing, and curating art that helped build enthusiasm for their own exhibit. Throughout the semester, Autry artists and educators worked collaboratively with students to create art labels and curate their exhibit. Before the exhibition, the graphic artists and art historians were invited to critique the first round of artwork (checking for historical accuracy and graphic design technical skills). Students used that feedback to redesign/edit their final art before curating their exhibit.

Guiding Elements

Academic and Life Skills

All teachers focus on building these skills in the unit

Beginning in first semester, students learn in both English and history classes how to successfully employ close reading strategies, image analysis, and critique, with an emphasis on formulating an argument in English class. Over the course of the unit, we integrate lessons that help reinforce these skills. In addition, students also focus on:

- Historical research/analysis (Sourcing, Contextualization, Corroboration using SHEG resources)
- Public speaking
- Using feedback, reflection to revise
- Collaboration

District Outcomes

Efficacious: This project helps students become more efficacious because of the open-ended critical thinking demands of innovation and the practical context of putting up an exhibit of finished art accompanied by didactic labels. The project gives students the open-ended challenge to analyze and critique master narratives that are often taken for granted, which means that the “answers” they seek are not “in the book” or easily found. Students see their capacity to generate their own critiques on history and their present lives through this process. In addition, the process of creating art, writing didactic labels, preparing the materials for hanging in an exhibit, and hosting that exhibit put real-world tasks in the hands of students.

Adaptable: Students present their art to a panel of professionals for critique with the explicit intention of taking the feedback to plan, research, and implement changes to their art before exhibiting it. This requires students to adapt to new ways of thinking about their information and ideas.

Worldly Wise: This project equips students to “read” any media critically, which will help them navigate media messages as they go into any field of study or profession.

Influential: The art in the exhibit aims to transform American narratives, such that they are more accurate, inclusive, and critical, influencing the beliefs and actions guiding America’s future.

Pathway Outcomes

Creative Innovation is one of the school’s pathway outcomes. For 11th grade, this outcome states:

- “Students examine, challenge, and critique history, culture, and society to pose a question that addresses 21st century global and local challenges.”
- “Students **cultivate** professional relationships and partnerships with clients to **design** real-world products, which exceed the clients’ and/or a community’s needs and honors the artist’s own vision.”

This project explicitly aims to support students in the first part of this grade-level outcome (see “Project Description” and comments on “District Outcomes” above). However, students also make progress toward the second part of this outcome because they are designing a real-world product and cultivating professional relationships.

Additionally, LAUSD’s Linked Learning team is focusing on strengthening core competencies around **argumentation** and **mathematics** tasks during the 2018–19 school year, with the goal of ensuring rigor and relevance to the industry sector:

Argumentation Tasks: The LAUSD Linked Learning office is holding a four-part professional development sequence from October 2018 through May 2019, developed in collaboration with [Envision Learning Partners](#) staff. The sequence is focused on creating more complex project-based learning tasks that build students’ research and argumentation skills. The training sessions will help teacher teams develop standards-based lesson plans focused on argumentation, as defined by [Next Generation Science Standards](#) and [Common Core State Standards](#). These sessions will also provide an opportunity for calibration; participating teachers will work together to develop a common understanding of “proficiency” within the argumentation area of a student’s portfolio and to discuss how best to standardize assessment in this area across the district. To develop meaningful and consistent methods for assessing argumentation-related tasks, the district will work with [ConnectEd](#) and [Envision Learning Partners](#) to craft content-specific rubrics grounded in existing research.

Mathematics Tasks: Following a similar model, the district’s Linked Learning team is working with [Envision Learning Partners](#) to implement a three-part professional development sequence from September 2018 through January 2019 on creating performance tasks for secondary mathematics. The district has found it challenging to integrate mathematics into the performance assessment framework because there is often less variation in the sorts of tasks performed in mathematics courses. Following this professional development session, teachers will be encouraged to test particular tasks in their courses and provide feedback at a later convening.²⁴

The Defense

After assembling their final portfolio in 12th grade, students prepare to give oral presentations and defend their work before a panel, typically composed of their teachers and community members. Each pathway has the flexibility to determine what must be included in the defense (i.e., the composition of artifacts required), according to its “mission, vision, and outcomes.”²⁵

During the defense presentation, a student must use their written reflection to orally “contextualize [each] artifact, explain what content matter was learned, and reflect on which pathway outcomes were achieved through [each] artifact.”²⁶ The district provides a [Senior Defense Presentation Template](#) to guide students in structuring their defenses.

Typically, defenses take 30–45 minutes. They begin with a 15-minute student presentation in which the student describes their educational journey and goals, while using their artifacts to demonstrate their work. The presentation is followed by a 5-minute question-and-answer session with the panel. After the panel deliberates (first independently and then collectively) for 5 minutes, the student is invited back into the room to receive feedback for the last 5 minutes. The question-and-answer time might also be broken up, so that the panel asks questions after each section of a student’s presentation (i.e., their presentation of each respective artifact). (See [video recordings](#) of select student defenses in LAUSD for more context.)

Prior to students' official defenses, the district urges pathways to provide students multiple opportunities to receive feedback on their defense presentations. For example, schools may facilitate opportunities for peer-to-peer feedback, encourage students to rehearse on their own time, and/or host mock defense events during advisory or other class time. Accordingly, the district provides resources for [Senior Defense Rubric for Peer Feedback](#) and for [Presentation Rehearsal Reflection](#).

Scoring and Feedback

LAUSD recommends that the portfolio and defense be graded separately. Though the district is encouraging schools to adopt uniform rubrics—for assessing both the individual artifacts within the portfolio and the senior defense presentation—these have not yet been fully adopted across pathways. The rubrics for the artifacts are aligned with the key “learning competencies” that pathways strive toward, such as [Scientific Inquiry, Analysis and Research](#), [Argumentation](#), and [Problem-Solving](#). For example, within the rubric for Scientific Inquiry, the scoring domains include elements such as “designing the investigation,” “identifying variables,” “collecting data,” and “communicating findings”—mapping onto the empirical structure of the scientific method.

The [Senior Defense Rubric](#) is designed to measure “the preparation, reflection, and quality of the student’s presentation skills.”²⁷ This rubric includes the following five scoring domains:

1. **Mastery of Knowledge:** What does this student *know*?
2. **Application of Knowledge:** What can this student *do*?
3. **Metacognition:** How *reflective* is this student?
4. **Presentation Skills:** What is the evidence that the student can give a formal presentation?
5. **Questions and Comments:** What is the evidence that the student can respond to spontaneous questions appropriately?

The rubric has space for pathways to customize their feedback on the defense with regard to how well a student achieves the specific outcomes of that pathway. The district also provides a [Defense Note-Taking Guide](#) and a [Defense Scoring Protocol](#) to aid panelists during the defense process. After all panelists have scored a given defense, they deliberate to reach agreement on whether a student passed or must resubmit their defense. (See [video](#) for example of deliberation process in LAUSD.)

The role of these assessments in determining students' graduation status varies across the district, but any student who does not pass the defense is asked to resubmit. Resubmitting involves working with a mentor teacher to address panelists' feedback and making the necessary improvements to pass the defense. Although resubmission practices vary by pathways, the district suggests that students be given multiple opportunities to resubmit their defenses, particularly if achieving a passing score is a graduation requirement.²⁸ In some pathways, students are allowed to walk at their graduation ceremony and then complete the necessary work to pass their defense afterward, whereas other pathways require students to successfully complete their defenses to graduate.

Systems of Support

Research suggests that the success of performance assessment systems depends on how teachers are trained, supported, and engaged throughout the performance assessment process and on which structures are in place to support students throughout that process.²⁹ LAUSD has a number of supports in place for both teachers and students to help expand their portfolio/defense model across its Linked Learning pathways.

Teacher Supports

LAUSD provides professional development opportunities for teachers to improve their score calibration skills to ensure that the scoring and deliberation processes are as reliable and consistent as possible within pathways and across the district. To that end, LAUSD has partnered with [Envision Learning Partners](#) to help coordinate calibration efforts. That includes providing schools with support from Linked Learning pathway coaches one day per week. How this time is spent varies depending on the needs of a particular school, but it may include support for teachers with designing projects, sustaining collaborative learning environments, integrating lessons, and more.³⁰

The district also offers [professional development workshops](#) with separate tracks for teams from new and veteran pathways. There were five portfolio/defense professional development sessions in the 2017–18 school year. According to an internal district survey, 95% of high school educators who participated in these training and professional development sessions reported that they were able to apply the lessons they learned and resources they acquired in their own practices.³¹ There were also three [Defense Design Studios](#) in the 2017–18 school year—portfolio/defense sessions hosted by Envision Learning Partners in which pathway, district, and state teams learn about LAUSD’s portfolio/defense model and observe a student presentation.

Finally, the district provides a [Calibration Protocol](#) and an [instructional video resource](#), and suggests that each school provide two professional development sessions annually on calibration for staff—the first to orient staff to the rubric, observe a sample defense, and practice calibration, and the second to work directly on calibrating the staff scoring. Though there are no standard procedures for external panelists, such as industry partners, the district suggests that they also receive calibration training through evening sessions, online platforms, or in-person trainings. The district recommends that pathways only allow adults who have been trained through calibration sessions to score students’ presentations.

Currently, principals and assistant principals are encouraged to attend the portfolio and defense professional development sessions to supplement the support they receive from Linked Learning coaches. Additionally, the district has been conducting a program quality review of pathways over the past 2 years and is developing a formal support system for school leaders. Currently, support for principals ranges from in-person check-ins and site visits to regularly scheduled conference calls with the Linked Learning team.

Student Supports

In addition to these professional learning supports for teachers and staff, the district has structures to support students as they go through the portfolio/defense process. Though schools vary in the accommodations they offer students completing the portfolio/defense, there are efforts across pathways to ensure that students are prepared for the unique academic and social-emotional demands of the portfolio/defense process.

As mentioned earlier, a number of supports are embedded into students' educational experiences even before they reach the time of their portfolio/defense in the 12th grade. For example, the Linked Learning district pathway requirement that all students in 9th through 12th grades present projects to industry personnel twice per year³² provides students with the experience of presenting in a forum similar to that of their senior defense. The Linked Learning office recommends that all pathways integrate at least two interdisciplinary, project-based assignments focused on career and technical information each year starting in the 9th grade to prepare students to engage in the level of academic rigor expected from the senior portfolio/defense.

When students reach 12th grade, there are additional structures to support them through the portfolio/defense. For example, schools might allow students to work on their senior defense during content classes such as English/language arts, government and/or economics, or during advisory.³³ Advisory provides students with the critical time and space to work on their portfolio/defense and to receive continual feedback on it from their advisory teacher.

In addition to these broad-based supports to prepare all students in pathways implementing the portfolio/defense, there are more targeted accommodations for special education students and English learner (EL) students that vary by pathway. For example, some pathways allow EL students to present their defense in English but respond to the question-and-answer section in Spanish. Special education students might have their Resource Specialist Program teacher determine different criteria for what it means to "pass" their defense based upon their Individualized Education Program (IEP)—for example, they might only need to exhibit basic proficiency in some categories of a particular rubric. Pathways may give special education and EL students additional time to complete their defenses and schedule their presentations toward the end of the defense presentation period to allow them to observe their peers' defenses before giving their own.³⁴

For more examples of potential accommodations, see a handout one LAUSD school site created on accommodations for the senior defense [here](#).

Funding/Technical Assistance

To support high-quality implementation and scaling of performance assessments, LAUSD relies on several external funding sources, including the Stuart Foundation and the [California Career Pathways Trust](#). The Stuart Foundation has helped to fund technical assistance support from Envision Learning Partners.³⁵ Meanwhile, the California Career Pathways Trust supports work-based learning initiatives and has helped fund in-school instructional coaches within pathways.³⁶ Additionally, LAUSD is engaged in a project with Pasadena Unified, Oakland Unified, Envision Learning Partners, ConnectEd, and the Learning Policy Institute, funded by the Assessment for Learning Project (ALP), that aims to further develop each participating district's performance assessment system. Through the grant, LAUSD is receiving additional technical assistance from Envision Learning Partners and ConnectEd and funding that supports the district's professional development around performance assessments.

Benefits of the Portfolio/Defense Model in LAUSD

Performance assessments are designed to encourage deeper learning and meaningful assessment of students, but their use in LAUSD also highlights their value in promoting high-quality instruction and curriculum. In particular, changing the means of student assessment can contribute to shifts in teacher instruction and concurrent shifts in the learning experiences of students.

How Teachers Benefit

The portfolio/defense model can give teachers an opportunity to reflect on their own practice. Research suggests that teaching with performance assessments provides teachers the information they need to effectively shift their own instruction to meet the learning needs of their students.³⁷ For example, one science teacher in LAUSD noted how the project-based learning inherent in performance assessments allows her to be more intentional in her personal teaching practice:

I think [performance assessments and project-based learning] also force me to zoom out a little bit and do a little bit more narrative arcs, in terms of—we're not just focusing on: "Here's how you define a joule," "Here's how you define power," "Here's how you define work." But instead, we use those tools to develop a way to affect the world around them. So, they develop conservation energy plans for the school and then they're [going to] help implement them, and hopefully be part of a competition.³⁸

Relatedly, performance assessments such as the portfolio/defense model can also open up the possibility for teachers to collect more useful data on student learning. Research demonstrates that having such rich feedback on how their students learn better equips teachers to assess areas in which they can improve their practice.³⁹ One LAUSD teacher commented on the value of data she and her colleagues obtained through observing student defenses:

The defense really gave us solid student data. By participating on the panels, we were able to analyze student work with the students in front of us. As a result, we were able to reflect on our own teaching, instruction, planning, etc.⁴⁰

LAUSD teachers have also reported that the portfolio/defense model has supported their work in preparing college- and career-ready graduates. One teacher reflected, "For the first time, students are actually connecting their schoolwork assignments to what they will do after school."⁴¹ Another teacher agreed and commended the model for encouraging students to better contextualize their education:

Students are talking about how they used skills that they didn't even think about before, as they are doing assignments. They are now looking at what and how they are learning, not just doing assignments.⁴²

This anecdotal evidence from LAUSD therefore supports the existing research findings that performance assessments can contribute to meaningful shifts in teachers' instructional practice. Further research about the conditions necessary to support teachers through these instructional shifts would help to better illuminate the nature of this change.

How Students Benefit

The portfolio/defense model in LAUSD supports Linked Learning pathways in driving toward improved student outcomes. According to 2016–17 internal survey findings from the LAUSD Linked Learning office, 54.6% of students enrolled in Linked Learning pathways completed the A-G coursework required for admission to the University of California and California State University systems, compared with only 49.8% of their peers who were not enrolled in Linked Learning pathways. Students enrolled in LAUSD Linked Learning pathways also had an 80% graduation rate—4 percentage points higher than the graduation rate of their peers not enrolled in Linked Learning pathways.⁴³

Reports from students and teachers who participate in performance assessments in the district provide preliminary support for the finding that the portfolio/defense model improves the learning experiences of students in LAUSD Linked Learning pathways. For example, performance assessments have the potential to bridge the gaps between the processes of teaching and learning and testing, so that assessments are seamlessly embedded into the curriculum and learning experience of students. Embedding assessments into the curriculum in this way “provides teachers with models for good curriculum and assessment practice, enhances curriculum equity within and across schools, and allows teachers to see and evaluate student learning in ways that can inform instructional and curriculum decisions.”⁴⁴ One science teacher described the nature of these shifts for her students:

I really like how [performance assessments and project-based learning] allow students to access content that they thought they were bad at. So, I didn't tell the students that the roller-coaster quiz [I administered] was a quiz until the end of the whole thing, when they turned their stuff in, and they were like “Wait, that was a *quiz*? Wait, but I could do this? Like, I didn't think that I could do physics. You know, I assumed that I couldn't do it because it was all math and I *did* this.”⁴⁵

Creating assessments that are integral to the learning process, rather than adjacent to it, opens up the possibility of more effectively motivating students to become engaged in learning.

The portfolio/defense model can also facilitate meaningful opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration. Speaking on the practice at the STEM Academy of Hollywood—where students regularly do public demonstrations of learning in peer feedback pairs—one teacher highlighted the power of this collaboration in her experience:

I love the revision process. I love watching a student go from “I can't do this” or “I'm not really sure how to do this,” to “Oh my god, this turned out so well.” And, I also really like the fact that, built into that whole [project-based learning] structure, is the opportunity for students to not just share their work with the community ... but to share the work with their peers ... I feel like you multiply the learning by *tenfold* when you implement projects like that. Because they're learning something really deeply about their own work, but then they're also picking up all of this really cool stuff, because it's driven by student choice.

Another teacher shared that performance assessments can also encourage students to take more ownership over building community in their school:

One of the things I notice when we do performance assessments and project-based learning is that our students stay after school way longer. They team up, they meet up on the weekends ... They don't think of it like learning. They don't think of it as hard, or something that they have to do. Instead, it's they really want to achieve this goal ... And I think it makes the school feel like this safe, fun place where you get to explore all these weird, crazy things.

This sense of community is critical insofar as the portfolio/model can provide opportunities for schools to support students' social-emotional learning. One student remarked on the impact of the defense process on their personal growth:

When I was done with this [senior defense] project, I realized that if it wasn't for this school, I wouldn't be the person I am today. LAHSA [Los Angeles High School of the Arts] has changed me in a very positive way, and I'm very thankful for that.

A teacher in the district reflected on how her students' ability to develop their voice through project-based learning (PBL) in the portfolio/defense model has had a profound impact on the English learner community in her school:

We've noticed that [with] something that seems like a hard task or a hard project to do, breaking it down through PBL gives [English learners] a sense of voice and ownership that we started to see unfold by the end of the project ... Prior to that, because of their lack of English skills, they weren't being incorporated into a formal PBL process and so we've noticed when we include them right away, we build a sense of community. And so now, looking back, [the] school year just started and seeing them come in this year, I'm seeing them just going down the hallway and go into a new class ... You have a sense they feel proud, or they feel a little bit more significant walking in, even though they might be still struggling in a new class, but you can feel they feel included. They feel they're part of a community of learning.

In short, there is preliminary evidence to suggest that the district's performance assessment system not only supports students' content-specific learning, but it also provides opportunities for students to reflect, collaborate with their peers, and develop their social-emotional learning competencies. Additional research on the effects of performance assessments on students' social-emotional learning might further highlight the ways in which such assessments can shift the learning experience of students.

Next Steps

As they plan for the future, members of the LAUSD Linked Learning team are reflecting on their experiences and determining which elements of the performance assessment model to keep, and which areas require further growth. The district aims to scale this performance assessment model to 50 pathways by 2018–19 and to standardize the role of performance assessments on a student’s graduation status within these pathways (i.e., whether passing means a student is able to walk at graduation, whether passing earns a student a particular graduation distinction, etc.).⁴⁶ The longer-term plan of the LAUSD Linked Learning office is to embed the portfolio/defense model into the program of study districtwide, given that there has been strong buy-in for the model within participating pathways thus far.⁴⁷

A priority moving forward is to continue to increase the rigor of performance tasks and their relevance to industry sectors, as well as ensuring key areas—such as rubrics and the deliberation process—are standardized in practice across schools and districts. The district’s Linked Learning office has been urging schools to employ the same [vetted rubrics](#) and calibrate their panelists’ scoring according to these rubrics; however, the standardized use of these rubrics is still being scaled across the district. Both of these steps are critical to ensuring consistency both within schools and across the district.

Accordingly, the district is working on a number of initiatives during the 2018–19 school year to address these concerns, including developing additional professional development channels for teachers and administrators around the rigor and relevance of mathematics and argumentation tasks. Additionally, the district is working with [ConnectEd](#) and [Envision Learning Partners](#) to provide both online and in-person professional development sessions around the topics of rigor and relevancy.

As the performance assessment system in LAUSD continues to develop, it remains focused on aligning curricula to foster students’ development of 21st century skills and helping teachers, staff, and administrators to make the necessary shifts in their own practices to support a system that prepares college- and career-ready graduates.

Appendix

LAUSD Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mf7SG_8OpYotoVoCKNi6j8luYKfEUb94WUU19UqiXuE/edit?usp=sharing

LAUSD Linked Learning Staff Portfolio & Defense Website:

<http://lausdportfoliodefense.weebly.com/>

LAUSD Linked Learning Student Portfolio & Defense Website:

<https://lausdstudentportfoliodefense.weebly.com/>

Endnotes

1. Name changed to respect the confidentiality of the student.
2. Site visit at the Los Angeles High School of the Arts (LAHSA) (2018, April 11).
3. Linked Learning. LAUSD Linked Learning Portfolio & Defense. <http://lausdportfoliodefense.weebly.com> (accessed 09/06/18).
4. Los Angeles Unified School District. About the Los Angeles Unified School District. (n.d.) <https://achieve.lausd.net/about> (accessed 07/20/18).
5. DataQuest reports, 2016–17, from California Department of Education.
6. Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education. (n.d.). “A district on the move”: Destination graduation. Strategic Plan 2016–2019. Los Angeles, CA: Author.
7. Hansen, M. (2017). The complex contexts behind the rising graduation rate in Los Angeles. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/06/20/the-complex-contexts-behind-the-rising-graduation-rate-in-los-angeles/> (accessed 09/24/2018).
8. DataQuest reports, 2016–17, from California Department of Education.
9. DataQuest reports, 2016–17, from California Department of Education.
10. Linked Learning. (n.d.) About Linked Learning. <http://www.linkedlearning.org/en/about/> (accessed 07/20/18).
11. Los Angeles Unified School District. (n.d.). LAUSD Linked Learning pathways by industry sector. <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/8076> (accessed 09/24/2018); personal email with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator (2018, September 21).
12. Warner, M., Caspary, K., Arshan, N., Stites, R., Padilla, C., Park, C., Patel, D., Wolf, B., Astudillo, S., Harless, E., Ammah-Tagoe, N., McCracken, M., & Adelman, N. SRI International. (2015). *Taking stock of the California Linked Learning District Initiative. Sixth-year evaluation report*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
13. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Lindsey Corcoran, Linked Learning Director (2018, July 12).
14. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Nancy Le, Linked Learning Technical Coach (2018, September 18).
15. This total number of 54 pathways includes the nine pathways in middle schools and one elementary school.
16. Unpublished data from the California Performance Assessment Collaborative, Learning Policy Institute (personal communication with LAUSD Linked Learning Office, spring 2018).
17. Wells, J., Soliman, E., & Le, Nancy. (2017). *Case study: Going deep with portfolio defense in LAUSD pathways* [PowerPoint slides]. <http://www.linkedlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Case-Study-Going-Deep-with-Portfolio-Defense-in-LAUSD-Pathways.pdf>.
18. LAUSD Linked Learning. (2017). *Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18: A Guide for LAUSD Linked Learning Pathways*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.
19. Personal email with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator (2018, September 21).
20. LAUSD Linked Learning. (2017). *Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18: A Guide for LAUSD Linked Learning Pathways*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.
21. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Nancy Le, Linked Learning Technical Coach (2018, August 28).
22. Darling-Hammond, L. (2014). *Next Generation Assessment: Moving Beyond the Bubble Test to Support 21st Century Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
23. Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity (SCALE). (n.d.) Envision Education Deeper Student Learning Assessment Initiative. <https://scale.stanford.edu/content/envision-education-deeper-student-learning-assessment-initiative> (accessed 09/06/18).
24. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Lindsey Corcoran, Linked Learning Director (2018, July 12).
25. LAUSD Linked Learning. (2017). *Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18: A Guide for LAUSD Linked Learning Pathways*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.

26. LAUSD Linked Learning. (2017). *Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18: A Guide for LAUSD Linked Learning Pathways*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.
27. LAUSD Linked Learning. (2017). *Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18: A Guide for LAUSD Linked Learning Pathways*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.
28. LAUSD Linked Learning. (2017). *Portfolio-Defense Handbook 2017–18: A Guide for LAUSD Linked Learning Pathways*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.
29. Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (Eds.). (2014). *Beyond the Bubble Test: How Performance Assessments Support 21st Century Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
30. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Lindsey Corcoran, Linked Learning Director (2018, July 12).
31. Unpublished data from the California Performance Assessment Collaborative, Learning Policy Institute (personal communication with LAUSD Linked Learning Office, spring 2018).
32. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Lindsey Corcoran, Linked Learning Director (2018, July 12).
33. Personal email with Nancy Le, LAUSD Linked Learning Technical Coach (2018, October 1).
34. Personal email with Nancy Le, LAUSD Linked Learning Technical Coach (2018, October 1).
35. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Nancy Le, Linked Learning Technical Coach (2018, August 28).
36. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Nancy Le, Linked Learning Technical Coach (2018, September 18).
37. Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (Eds.). (2014). *Beyond the Bubble Test: How Performance Assessments Support 21st Century Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
38. Focus group with LAUSD Linked Learning teachers (2018, September 13).
39. Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (Eds.). (2014). *Beyond the Bubble Test: How Performance Assessments Support 21st Century Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
40. LAUSD Linked Learning. (n.d.). Data from the field. <http://lausdportfoliodefense.weebly.com/data-from-the-field.html> (accessed 09/24/2018).
41. LAUSD Linked Learning. (n.d.). Data from the field. <http://lausdportfoliodefense.weebly.com/data-from-the-field.html> (accessed 09/24/2018).
42. LAUSD Linked Learning. (n.d.). Data from the field. <http://lausdportfoliodefense.weebly.com/data-from-the-field.html> (accessed 09/24/2018).
43. Personal email with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator (2018, September 26).
44. Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (Eds.). (2014). *Beyond the Bubble Test: How Performance Assessments Support 21st Century Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
45. Focus group with LAUSD Linked Learning teachers (2018, September 13).
46. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Lindsey Corcoran, Linked Learning Director (2018, July 12).
47. Personal phone conversation with Esther Soliman, Linked Learning Administrator, and Nancy Le, Linked Learning Technical Coach (2018, August 28).