

# 2019 SNAPSHOT

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### OVERVIEW

Linked Learning is an approach to educational reform that combines rigorous academics, demanding Career Technical Education (CTE), real-world experiences and integrated student supports.<sup>1</sup> Linked Learning emerged in Detroit in 2013 as a collaborative effort of national and local funders, ConnectED: The National Center for College and Career, Detroit teachers and principals, and community-based organizations attempting to better serve the students of Detroit.<sup>2</sup> Usually implemented as a district-wide strategy, Linked Learning instead launched on a school-by-school basis during a period of turmoil: The district's debt was continuing to balloon after more than a decade of state-imposed emergency management, corruption was commonplace throughout the system, lack of coordination across school districts created destructive conflict for staff and students and student outcomes continued to be among the lowest in the nation. Operating with a revolving door of emergency managers and shuttering schools and community-based organizations often described as the "wild west" of education, Linked Learning eventually found a home at United Way of Southeastern Michigan, an intermediary that had been providing direct support and resources to schools in the absence of consistent and effective district leadership.

In June 2016, the JPMorgan Chase & Co. New Skills for Youth initiative, along with the Skillman Foundation and the Ford Foundation, invested in United Way to expand Linked Learning Detroit.<sup>3</sup> That same month, the Michigan Legislature approved a \$617 million bailout to help the district start fresh by creating the Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD). The Board of Education was reinstated in early 2017, and a new superintendent, Dr. Nikolai Vitti, took the helm in mid-2017. After conducting extensive audits of the system to better understand the problems, Dr. Vitti launched a three-year strategic plan for DPSCD, which included a commitment to build on the Linked Learning approach by establishing career academies at all high schools in the district and to brand each school with a specific career pathway.

### JPMORGAN CHASE NEW SKILLS FOR YOUTH INITIATIVE

Launched in 2016, New Skills for Youth<sup>4</sup> is a \$75 million, five-year global initiative aimed at transforming how cities and states ensure that young people are career ready. The overarching goals of the initiative are to:

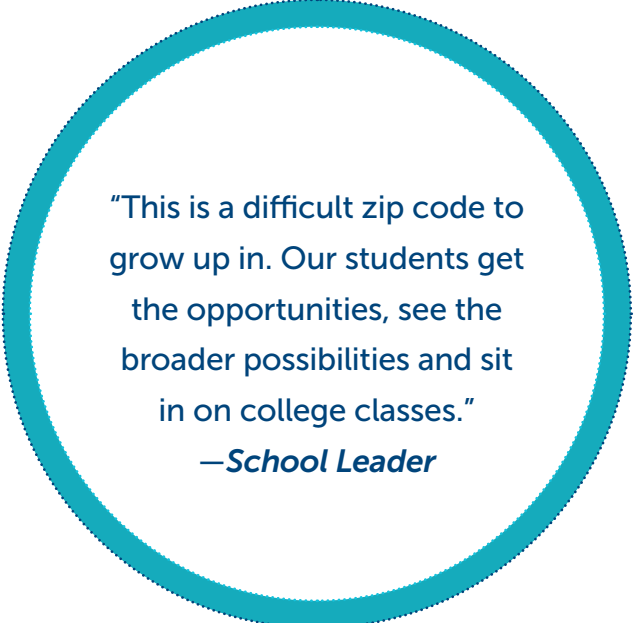
- Dramatically increase the number of students who successfully complete career pathways that begin in secondary school and culminate in postsecondary degrees or credentials tied to high-wage, high-demand jobs; and
- Catalyze transformational approaches to the design and delivery of programs and policies to increase students' career readiness and disseminate lessons learned around the world.

This snapshot is part of a series documenting the progress of the local investments from across the globe that aim to identify and implement the most promising ideas in career education, with a special focus on communities with the greatest needs.

# THE LINKED LEARNING DETROIT INITIATIVE

The New Skills for Youth investment provided United Way of Southeastern Michigan with an opportunity to expand the footprint of Linked Learning pathways in more high schools in Detroit. More broadly, the investment supports United Way's efforts to align and focus community stakeholders and resources in pursuing the long-term collective action essential to realizing the promise of a renewed Detroit for all of its citizens. Specifically, United Way is committed to:

- Offering coaching and other forms of professional development and continuing to strengthen the quality of college and career pathways in the eight schools it was already supporting;
- Engaging up to at least 12 additional high schools in (a) needs and capacity assessment, (b) career pathway design and implementation, and (c) site-level and pathway-level coaching and leadership development;
- Building and staffing Linked Learning Detroit to organize collective action with key community stakeholders, especially employers and postsecondary institution, to develop a system of comprehensive secondary/postsecondary college and career pathways serving Detroit;
- Designing and implementing a system of work-based learning (WBL), including employing WBL directors to work with schools and encouraging employers to expand opportunities for youth to engage regularly with working adults for real-world problem solving; and
- Developing a data dashboard of key metrics to monitor progress and engage career pathway, site and district leadership in continuous improvement.



**“This is a difficult zip code to grow up in. Our students get the opportunities, see the broader possibilities and sit in on college classes.”**  
**—School Leader**

Three elements make the Detroit Linked Learning initiative stand out: efforts to provide support and build capacity in the district office and within schools, the expansion of career pathways and the work around fostering business partnerships and expanding WBL.

# ABOUT LINKED LEARNING

Linked Learning is an approach to educational reform that combines rigorous academics, demanding CTE, real-world experience and integrated student supports. The approach first launched in California and is expanding to other regions of the country.

Linked Learning pathways prepare students for college, career and life by integrating

## **FOUR CORE COMPONENTS:**

### RIGOROUS ACADEMICS

Rigorous academics that prepare students to take credit-bearing college-level courses and be university admissible; maximize articulation between high school and postsecondary programs of study; and facilitate and accelerate completion of postsecondary credentials, certificates and degrees.

### CAREER-TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Technical training that is embedded through a sequence of classes; integrated with academic content standards; and aligned with career opportunities in a variety of high-need, high-skill occupations, including opportunities for stackable certificates, credentials or degrees, where relevant.

### WORK-BASED LEARNING

WBL sequences that reach from career awareness and exploration into postsecondary training and education, providing opportunities to apply core academic content and technical training while developing the skills, competencies and dispositions that are critical to workplace success.

### COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT SERVICES

Comprehensive support services that are embedded as central components of a program of study, address the unique needs of individual students, and include academic and socio-emotional supports to ensure equity of access, opportunity and success.

Linked Learning is guided by **SIX PRINCIPLES:**

- Linked Learning prepares students to succeed in college, career and life.
- Linked Learning prepares high school students for a full range of post-graduation opportunities.
- Linked Learning connects academics to real-world applications.
- Linked Learning improves student engagement.
- Linked Learning is an approach, not a program.
- Linked Learning is for all students.

Source: Linked Learning Alliance<sup>5</sup>

## ***Providing Support and Building Capacity in an Evolving Landscape***

Community and education stakeholders in Detroit are cautiously optimistic about the newly formed DPSCD central office. After decades of operating under state-imposed emergency management, hope is emerging as educators, administrators and families work to build trust under a restructured school district and a new superintendent. Yet, roles and responsibilities — both formal and informal — are in flux in an environment in which a host of community-based stakeholders, including United Way, have been providing much-needed support for years, including direct services to schools, such as professional development and curriculum development, as well as financial support. Building the capacity of the central office at DPSCD is a process and a significant culture shift following years of emergency management that resulted in organic work at each individual school.

United Way filled the holes during periods of crisis and transition and served as a trusted partner in the community. DPSCD cites the partnership/collaboration with United Way as a success point during the short time period since the transition. School administrators and teachers also point to United Way as a trusted partner as they navigate the shift in culture to a more centralized district leadership, in addition to being a valued resource working on the ground to help them implement the Linked Learning approach. This trust and value are particularly evident among the administrators and staff from the original Linked Learning sites. For example, West Side Academy, an alternative high school that serves over-age, under-credit students, credits United Way with enhancing professional development; building support networks

among principals and teachers; supporting career fairs; working with students on portfolios and resumes; hosting mock interviews; and providing both financial and staff support, including a WBL director.

## ***Expanding Career Pathways***

A cornerstone of the strategy for turning around DPSCD is creating career pathways aligned to high-growth, high-wage jobs. This effort includes expanding career academies to all of the district's public high schools, with an emphasis on obtaining certifications — an outgrowth of the incubation of the Linked Learning approach at individual schools during emergency management.

As DPSCD scales the vision for career pathways and career academies, United Way has continued to play a key role in providing staff support directly to schools and to the district, while also functioning as an intermediary for the various stakeholders. Following the approval of the strategic plan, United Way formalized a relationship with DPSCD to integrate Linked

Learning across the district, which included a process to onboard new schools and determine career pathways in coordination with the district leadership and a data sharing agreement to better track metrics and student progress. With that, the Linked Learning team at United Way expanded upon the original goals of the New Skills for Youth investment to align with the strategic plan, supporting the district in the expansion of career pathways to all 22 high schools in the 2018-19 school year and shifting Linked Learning from a school-level strategy to a district-wide strategy. A team of United Way career pathway coaches and WBL directors is now embedded in 19 high schools, organized by industry clusters.



***“Any time we can be instrumental in helping someone find their way, it’s a step in the right direction.”  
—Employer and Intern Supervisor***

# PUTTING “BOOTS ON THE GROUND”

## Support Linked Learning implementation in the context of Detroit’s education landscape requires targeted support.

- Pathway Coaches (guide the development of the program of study, support multi-disciplinary project development and implementation, help identify funding streams to cover costs, etc.)
- Work-Based Learning Directors (develop Pathway Advisory Boards, recruit employer partners for both project-based and work-based learning opportunities)
- AmeriCorps VISTAs (add capacity to targeted projects, such as FAFSA completion and attendance campaigns)

## Work-Based Learning Directors are “the secret sauce.” This position:

- Allows the schools to leverage the United Way’s organizational rolodex
- Ensures sufficient capacity on the ground to effectively manage corporate partnerships
- Supports Pathway Advisory Board members as champions for the work, leveraging their networks to expand work-based learning opportunities



Scaling from a handful of schools to all high schools throughout the district in a single year has been challenging for all stakeholders involved. Implementing a meaningful continuum of career-focused learning requires a significant investment in staff and resources to be successful. Many schools throughout Detroit experience significant staff turnover, which affects their ability to build a solid foundation of support and high-quality programming for Linked Learning and WBL opportunities for students. United Way is often the constant at those schools, taking the lead on managing the advisory board members and other industry partners. Being without a strong school-level partner is also challenging on the implementation front when access to student information is needed, such as permission slips.

During the grant period, United Way laid the groundwork for a focus on improving the quality of career pathways. All schools have met certification requirements for NAF, a career academy model consisting of four elements: academy development and structure, curriculum and instruction,

an advisory board and WBL.<sup>6</sup> In addition, all schools have met candidate-level certification requirements for Linked Learning, meaning basic program elements are in place.<sup>7</sup> To get to the next level, Silver, schools must focus on quality by using basic data to inform program design and improve student outcomes. Also, ConnectED and NAF provide trainings to United Way’s Linked Learning team and to school staff to enhance the curriculum and professional development.

One outstanding deliverable is the development of a data dashboard of key metrics to monitor progress and engage career pathway, site and district leadership in continuous improvement. United Way negotiated a data sharing agreement with the district but does not have access to information yet. School-level staff and United Way anecdotally point to improved student engagement; however, the lack of access to accurate, meaningful data to track student progress and improve career pathway quality continues to pose challenges. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress ranked Detroit last in student perfor-

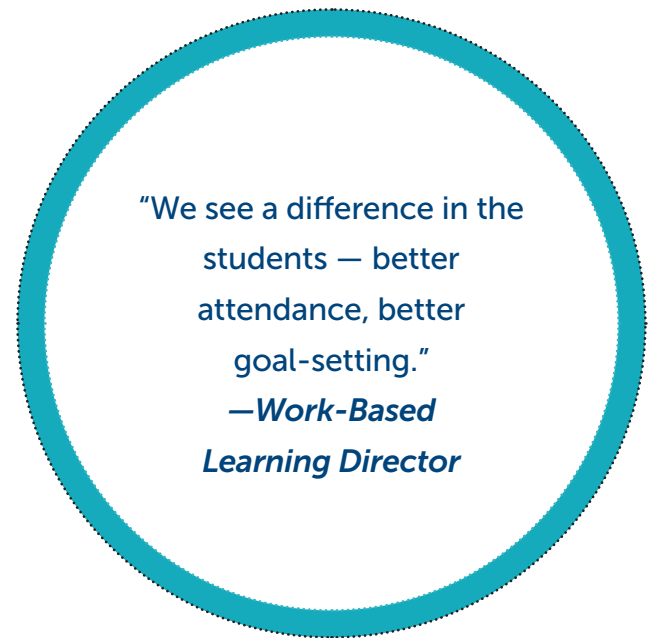
mance in the entire nation, a figure that is at the forefront of the minds of stakeholders throughout the community.<sup>8</sup> DPSCD will need to get data systems and processes up and running in short order given the enormous political and public pressure to improve student outcomes.

### ***Fostering Business Partnerships and Expanding WBL***

United Way has made strides in cultivating business partnerships that result in additional resources for schools and WBL experiences for students — both inside and outside of school. In particular, United Way has helped schools cultivate advisory boards that provide business leaders associated with a particular career pathway the opportunity to collaborate with educators to inform classroom learning and WBL.

United Way and business and industry partners are also helping schools design and implement a continuum of WBL experiences for students. Offerings vary from school to school, but those schools that have been implementing Linked Learning the longest are moving toward a more cohesive, robust list of experiences. For example, Benjamin Carson High School of Science and Medicine provides students with a range of experiences, including a health careers exploration class, advisory classes, field trips, mentor programs and internships at a hospital that is within walking distance of the school.

WBL opportunities are rapidly expanding city-wide as well. In addition to the district-wide focus on career pathways, efforts are expanding to provide students with WBL experiences outside of school, including Mayor Mike Duggan's Grow Detroit's Young Talent initiative, a city-wide summer jobs program that employs young adults between the ages of 14 and 24. United Way is partnering with Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation



on a number of efforts to better connect its work in the school district with these broader city-wide workforce initiatives.<sup>9</sup> For example, United Way has helped to implement a 12-hour training program to prepare Linked Learning students to participate in Grow Detroit's Young Talent. This effort includes making sure that students have the required documents, such as a Social Security card, and preparing them for interviews. United Way and JOURNi, a non-profit dedicated to teaching youth how to code, are also building an app to help students connect to city-wide activities and opportunities.<sup>10</sup> While the summer employment opportunities are not explicitly connected to the district-wide career pathways — or to individual students' career pathway participation — that alignment is something United Way and others are looking to strengthen.

# FOSTERING BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

United Way of Southeastern Michigan is fostering business partnerships across the city that reach students both inside and outside of school:

The **Honigman Academy** is an education opportunity that provides high school students from Cody High School, primarily 10th graders, with a broad overview of life at a corporate law firm. Honigman hosts students in the Detroit office for eight sessions covering a host of topics from the federal legislative process to ethical dilemmas to character fitness to soft skills development. The academy is designed and taught by the law firm's employees.

The **Summer Career Connections Fair** — a collaborative event that connects a number of city initiatives — has engaged 565 Linked Learning high school juniors to explore career opportunities, resulting in approximately 300 job offers for summer employment. The event is entering its third year.

**TechTown Detroit** is partnering with Osborn High school to design and deliver an entrepreneur curriculum to 10th grade students in the finance pathway. The curriculum provides students with an immersive, hands-on, project-based experience that includes visits to businesses in the area to learn from local entrepreneurs. The program is certified through NAF and is expanding to Mumford High School and Central High School.

The **Quicken Loans Network program** for 10th–12th grade students bridges the gap between classroom learning and real-world application. Sessions focus on savings, money management, resume prep, mock interviews, protecting and promoting your brand on social media, college readiness, career exploration and summer internships.

## LOOKING FORWARD

As DPSCD implements the three-year strategic plan, the goal is to build the capacity of district staff to take on the career pathway coaching role, while the WBL role will be supported by the United Way of Southeastern Michigan. The transition to a more centralized district leadership within DPSCD will take time and is not likely to be a linear

path as stakeholders work to rebuild trust and redefine roles and responsibilities. DPSCD is focused on setting policies and procedures, being consistent and reliable to gain trust, and holding schools accountable when they are operating outside of well-defined parameters.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more information about Linked Learning and ConnectED, see <https://connectednational.org/learn/about/what-is-linked-learning/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://connectednational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/linked-learning-DetroitFINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/corporate/news/pr/4mm-to-prepare-detroit-students-for-high-demand-jobs.htm>

<sup>4</sup> For more information about New Skills for Youth, see <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/corporate/news/stories/newskillsforyouth.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.linkedlearning.org/about/>

<sup>6</sup> For more information about NAF, see <https://naf.org>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://certification.linkedlearning.org>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2018/04/10/detroit-schools-again-worst-nation-rigorous-national-exam-while-michigan-over-all-sees-no-significant/493893002/>

<sup>9</sup> For more information about Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation, see <https://www.descmiworks.com>.

<sup>10</sup> For more information about JOURNi, see <http://www.journi.org>