

Scaling Career-Connected Dual Enrollment

How College and K-12 Partners Can Strengthen Pathways and Expand Opportunity

CASE STUDY ON STRATEGY 2A: THEME-BASED HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMIES

Pouring Dual Enrollment “Gravy” Onto the Academy “Biscuit” at Oakland Unified School District

Asked to describe how dual enrollment fits into his school’s career academies, Oakland Technical High School Principal Martel Price used a memorable analogy: The academies are the “biscuit” and dual enrollment is the “gravy.”

The image captures how Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is scaling career-connected dual enrollment by building it into the district’s existing Linked Learning model, in which high school students participate in theme-based academies that connect academic coursework, career exploration, work-based learning, and postsecondary planning.

Beginning around 2009, OUSD began implementing Linked Learning as a districtwide strategy to transform high schools into gateways to college and career pathways. Students in grades 10–12 are grouped into themed academies with cohort-based learning communities, academy teacher teams, career-connected projects, and work-based learning opportunities. Today, all of the district’s 16 high schools are “wall-to-wall,” with nearly every student in an academy.

Enter the gravy. In 2014, Oakland residents passed a local parcel tax to provide sustained funding to expand college and career opportunities for high school students, with a primary goal of integrating rigorous academics into career pathways. These local investments propelled a decade of career-connected dual enrollment growth. From 2015 to 2025, annual dual enrollment (DE) participation grew from roughly 500 students to approximately 1,700 students, increasing the DE participation rate from 25% to 49% of all OUSD graduates.

FAST FACTS:

Oakland Unified School District

- Enrolls 9,104 high school students across 16 high schools (6 comprehensive) in Oakland, CA
- About 49% of students take dual enrollment, up from 25% ten years ago
- Most dual enrollment courses are taught as high school electives—at the high school and during the high school day—by college faculty, with support from high school teachers in the classroom
- Nearly all high school students in the district enroll in a career academy in grades 10–12

These investments enabled OUSD to expand dual enrollment from an isolated opportunity for a small group of advanced students to a widespread acceleration opportunity relevant to students’ emerging interests and connected to their other high school experiences.

Making Dual Enrollment an Expected Part of the Academy Experience

OUSD’s dual enrollment strategy begins with a clear premise: Dual enrollment should be for all students, not only those already perceived as college-bound.

Because students are already organized into Linked Learning pathways, schools have a built-in structure for introducing dual enrollment as part of students’ pathway experience. Rather than asking students to opt into a separate college program, staff present dual enrollment as one of the ways students can explore their academy theme, deepen their learning on subjects that interest them, and be exposed to college-level academic expectations while still in high school.

Examples of OUSD's Career Academies



Linked Learning Pathway: Energy, Utilities, and Environment

- Green Energy Academy at Skyline High School
- Environmental Science Academy at Oakland High School



Linked Learning Pathway: Engineering and Design

- Sustainable Urban Design Academy at Castlemont High School
- Engineering Academy at McClymonds Technical High School



Linked Learning Pathway: Health Science and Medical Technology

- Community Health Equity Academy at Castlemont High School
- Health Academy at Oakland Technical High School
- Life Academy of Health & Bioscience at Life Academy

Building dual enrollment into academies did not happen overnight. At Oakland Technical High School, the dual enrollment coordinator, Amy Martinez, continues to conduct extensive classroom outreach across each of the high school’s academies to promote DE opportunities. In one year, Martinez delivered more than 30 presentations explaining what DE is, which courses are available, and why students should consider participating. Her messaging is designed to reach a wide range of students: Dual enrollment is not just for the “advanced kids” but for students who want to explore a field, save money on college, build confidence, earn transferable credit, or get a head start on a program connected to a good job after graduation.

Most DE courses offered at OUSD are treated as high school electives, which gives schools flexibility to offer engaging topics aligned to students’ interests and academy themes. Each year at Oakland Tech, academy teaching teams and the DE coordinator identify possible college courses related to academy themes, and students vote on potential courses to help determine which DE courses will be offered the next year. This approach helps ensure that offerings reflect students’ interests and that enough students enroll for sections to run.

One example is from the Race, Policy, and Law Academy, where students expressed interest in a course on the history of the Black Panther Party offered through Merritt College’s African American Studies department. The course connected directly to Oakland’s history, students’ identities, and the academy’s focus on race, policy, and civic life. Other culturally relevant offerings, including Latino film and folklore courses, have similarly helped make dual enrollment feel meaningful and accessible to students who might not otherwise see college coursework as designed for them.

Connecting College Courses to Academies Without Limiting Students’ Options

OUSD’s DE courses are generally offered during the regular school day. Courses are curated by staff and students to reinforce academy themes, but students ultimately select which DE courses they want to take, even if a course is aligned to a different academy. This approach provides flexibility for students who want to go deeper into their academy theme while also helping other students explore topics they are interested in. OUSD leaders explained that this matters because not every student receives their first-choice academy placement, and many students’ interests evolve over time. This flexible alignment model helps OUSD avoid turning academies into narrow career tracks. Instead, dual enrollment serves as a structured exploration tool.

The elective-based model also helps OUSD scale dual enrollment. Because most DE courses are offered as electives, schools can add college courses without displacing core high school courses or creating conflicts with graduation requirements. This approach has been especially useful as schools have adopted block schedules with more room for electives. At Oakland Tech, leaders noted that dual enrollment has become essential to the master schedule; without college courses taught by faculty from the Peralta Community College District, the school would struggle to offer enough engaging elective options.

Helping Students Navigate Options and Make Meaning of College Courses

OUSD’s flexible course model depends on strong advising. Because students may choose from courses aligned with their academy or courses aligned to other fields, they need help understanding what different options mean and how those choices connect to college, careers, and their own interests.

At Oakland Tech, Martinez plays a central role: She meets with students, visits classes, explains course options, helps students understand how credits may apply to different college and career pathways, and works with academy teachers and counselors to identify courses that fit students’ goals.

Counseling and advising are also organized through the academy structure. At Oakland Tech, academy-specific counselors work with academy teacher teams and the DE coordinator to support students. School leaders described this as a “container of care.” Students belong to a smaller learning community inside a large high school, which helps position the adults in the community to notice and address students’ interests, challenges, and needs.

Other schools in the district—like Madison Park Academy (MPA), which serves students in grades 6–12 in East Oakland—use a similar shared-support approach. MPA uses its Future Center model, which includes an academy coach, a work-based learning liaison, a college and career specialist, and counselors.

Bringing College Faculty Into High Schools With K-12 Support Around Them

While most DE courses are taught by college faculty at the high school, there is usually also an OUSD teacher in the classroom. This model is the product of collective bargaining agreements with both faculty and teacher unions. And while the high school teacher in the DE classroom has only a few formal responsibilities, such as attendance and safety, in many classrooms this arrangement produces inspiring, collaborative DE instruction. High school teachers get access to Canvas and can monitor students’ progress, remind them about deadlines, help students break assignments into smaller steps, and follow up when they fall behind.

OUSD has invested in professional development to ensure that the college faculty teaching in their buildings effectively teach the students not only the course content but also how to be college students: how to read a syllabus, submit assignments, email an instructor, take notes, ask for help, and advocate for themselves. Recent professional development seminars have focused on topics like equitable grading and scaffolding assignments.

Additionally, OUSD leaders are thoughtful about recruiting, vetting, and supporting college instructors. OUSD staff conduct pre-semester meetings and informal screenings to assess whether instructors are a good fit for teaching high school students. Leaders look for faculty who bring not only content expertise but also warmth, flexibility, and a willingness to teach the college-going skills that many students are encountering for the first time. One Oakland Tech DE instructor described this as teaching “from a place of care,” emphasizing that students need to feel seen and valued before they can fully engage with college-level content.

Establishing a Vision and Investing in Infrastructure

OUSD’s experience illustrates both the promise and challenges of scaling career-connected dual enrollment through theme-based career academies. By building dual enrollment into Linked Learning pathways, the district has transformed dual enrollment from an isolated opportunity for a small group of students into a widespread part of the academy experience. At the same time, the strategy depends on substantial investments in staffing and coordination. District leaders manage college partnerships, registration systems, instructor recruitment, and professional development, while school-based coordinators, counselors, and academy staff help students navigate options and connect college courses to their interests and goals. And limited DE infrastructure from its postsecondary partner has meant that OUSD staff shoulder much of the responsibility for coordination, advising, instructor support, and troubleshooting.

Despite these challenges, OUSD demonstrates what is possible when a district commits to making career-relevant, engaging dual enrollment a central part of students’ pathway experiences. Across these efforts, OUSD leaders have implemented a clear vision: Dual enrollment works best not as a separate dish but as the gravy that enriches the academy biscuit.

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