

Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process Guide

Purpose of This Guide

This web resource is designed for those who are engaged in or support the continuous improvement and eventual certification of Linked Learning pathways – teachers, counselors, site and district administrators, internal and external coaches, advisory board members, and partners. This version of the User's Guide is designed to support pathways during the 2014-15 school year.

Organization

The User's Guide begins with basic information and training about the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process, and then is organized around the two intersecting cycles that make up the process. It is broken into several sections:

- Preparation
 - Purpose of the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process
 - The Essential Elements
 - Online tools to support the process: OPTIC (the Online Pathway Tool for Improvement and Certification) and the Digital Certification (DigCert) Tool
 - Training
 - District support
- Continuous Improvement Cycle using OPTIC
 - Accessing OPTIC
 - Self-assessment
 - Action planning

- Pathway improvements
- Evidence collection
- Development of and access to the Data Center
- Certification Cycle using DigCert
 - Initiating the process
 - District validation
 - Preliminary review of evidence
 - Preparing for the site visit
 - Site visit
 - Final report
 - Return to continuous improvement cycle

Preparation

Purpose of the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process

The pathway quality review process ensures both quality and equity across district- and statewide systems of Linked Learning. Specifically, it does the following:

- Promotes a shared vision of equitable, high-quality Linked Learning pathways to improve student outcomes. Pathways transform the high school experience by integrating rigorous academics with real-world technical skills, work-based learning, and personalized supports.
- Certifies a high level of pathway quality, rigor, and fidelity. The pathway quality review process promotes consistency in the development, implementation, and sustainability of Linked Learning pathways.
- Supports continuous improvement of pathways through a self-assessment and action-planning process and recognizes measurable stages of progress toward certification, sustainability, and exemplary practice.

The mutually reinforcing goals of promoting continuous pathway improvement and validating high quality result in the following outcomes:

- improved student learning experiences and outcomes
- equitable opportunities that ensure that all students graduate prepared for college, career, and life

The Essential Elements

The seven Essential Elements of high-quality Linked Learning pathways were developed by a Design Team composed of practitioners, support providers, and other key partners. In establishing the Essential Elements, the Design Team sought to streamline and clarify an earlier set of forty quality criteria that were guided by decades of research and established national standards of practice accepted and validated by organizations supporting career academies.

Before engaging in the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process, it is essential that all members of a pathway team, as well as site and district administrators and advisory board members, become familiar with the Essential Elements and the associated developmental rubric. The training described below will introduce users to the Essential Elements and the associated rubric.

The seven Essential Elements include:

Student outcomes–driven practice

The progress of every student toward achieving measurable and consequential learning outcomes is the driving purpose for the pathway community of practice. The pathway team regularly reviews several kinds of evidence, including (1) performance-based measures of pathway-specific student learning outcomes; (2) information on students' level of performance, available from student information systems; (3) individual student growth in performance, both on pathway-specific learning outcomes and on transcript-based measures; (4) students' success after high school in postsecondary education and employment, if available; and (5) trends over time in all these measures for the pathway students as a group. The team uses data on a monthly basis to inform and improve professional practice, and on an annual basis to revise the pathway improvement plan.

Equity, access, and achievement

A Linked Learning pathway pursues both excellence and equity as mutual goals. A pathway establishes high achievement expectations for all students and practices nondiscriminatory and inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogy. The pathway is equitably accessible to and serves well any interested student, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, special needs, or prior academic achievement. An equity-focused pathway intentionally reflects the diversity and strengths of its school, community, and district; and the grouping of its students is heterogeneous, flexible, and equitable.

Program of study

An industry-themed pathway program of study brings coherence to the four core components of Linked Learning: rigorous academics, real-world technical skills, work-based learning, and personalized supports. It intentionally coordinates and sequences student learning experiences in a way that integrates rigorous academic and technical core curricula. The pathway theme is broad enough to appeal to and engage all students. The program of study maximizes cohort scheduling to ensure that all pathway students are offered the opportunity to earn postsecondary credit and are prepared for success in the full range of postsecondary options.

Learning and teaching

Pathway students engage in inquiry- and project-based learning that is outcome-focused, rigorous, relevant, and collaborative. Members of the pathway community of practice plan such learning experiences for students: They regularly collaborate to develop and articulate standards-aligned grade-level, course-level, and project-level outcomes to organize the pathway's program of study and guide assessment, curricular, and instructional planning. They also use performance assessment tasks with common rubrics to assess, monitor, and support every student's progress toward mastery of college- and career-ready pathway learning outcomes. The community of practice regularly engages in professional learning, evidence-based inquiry, and reflection to continuously improve their practice.

Work-based learning

All students participate in a personalized and coordinated continuum of work-based-learning (WBL) experiences designed to help them master and demonstrate academic, technical, and 21st-century skills, as identified in the pathway student learning outcomes. WBL builds on and extends every pathway's program of study. WBL occurs in person and online: in the work place, in the community, and at school. Students acquire academic, technical, and 21st-century knowledge and skills through WBL, all of which enhance their preparedness for the demands of college and careers.

Personalized student support

Every pathway student is supported by pathway staff, community partners, and families. The pathway community of practice tailors learning experiences to students' individual developmental needs, skills, strengths, interests, and aspirations. Pathway staff, in consultation with families and service providers, identify and address the academic, personal, and social-emotional needs of every student so that she/he makes progress toward achieving personalized college and career goals and pathway student learning outcomes.

Pathway leadership and partnerships

The pathway staff, school and district leaders, and community partners share responsibility for program effectiveness and accountability for student outcomes. These stakeholders ensure that conditions are in place to establish and sustain pathway quality. The pathway engages a formal advisory board that serves as an organizing structure to effectively engage a core of stakeholders, including business, postsecondary, and community partners.

Online Tools to Support the Process

ConnectEd Studios is an online platform that supports many features of Linked Learning. Two ConnectEd Studios tools are designed to support the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process. The training described below will introduce users to the functions of both tools.

OPTIC – The Online Pathway Tool for Improvement and Certification supports the pathway continuous improvement cycle. It does so by

- facilitating a pathway self-assessment process to determine areas of strength and areas of growth, aligned to the Essential Elements;
- supporting the development of an action plan for improvement in selected areas of growth;
- linking pathway teams to tools, resources, and promising practices available in the Pathway Toolkit;
- providing an easy-to-use way for pathway teams to monitor their progress on their action plan;
- allowing pathway teams to upload evidence that indicates they are meeting the Essential Elements;
- hosting a Data Center for pathway teams to submit and retain multiple years of student-level data; and
- defining terms as a “hover over” feature.

The Digital Certification (DigCert) Tool supports the certification cycle. It does so by

- porting any/all data and evidence from OPTIC into DigCert;
- allowing pathways or districts to indicate when they are ready to move from the continuous improvement cycle and initiate the pathway certification process;
- providing a venue for additional evidence to support each of the Essential Elements;
- granting access to evidence to district leaders who are responsible for reviewing evidence in order to assess whether and validate that a pathway is ready to proceed with the certification process;
- granting access to evidence to professionally trained Lead Reviewers so they may conduct a preliminary review of evidence and provide feedback to the pathway with a determination of readiness; and

- providing a venue for a Lead Reviewer and other assigned reviewer(s) to take notes about evidence, raise questions to pursue during a site visit, make determinations about whether criteria are met, and generate a final report after the visit listing commendations and recommendations.

Training

As the manager of the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process, ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career collaborates with professionally trained Lead Reviewers and Linked Learning partners to provide training and consultancy to pathway, school-site, and district leaders, as well as coaches, about the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process. Training is provided through in-person orientation sessions, online webinars, and “on-time” technical assistance consultancy.

The training includes the following:

ORIENTATION

- Understanding the Essential Elements and developmental rubric
- Coordinating district support

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT CYCLE

- Setting up your pathway team in OPTIC
- Completing your self-assessment and action plan
- Working with your pathway community of practice to implement and monitor improvements
- Adding data to your Data Center

CERTIFICATION CYCLE

- Overview of the Certification Process; Using DigCert
- Establishing a collaborative process focused on shared learning
- Identifying and collecting quality evidence
- Planning and pursuing district validation
- Preparing for the site visit

District Support

District leaders play an essential role throughout the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process. In addition to their ongoing work to ensure that the conditions are in place to enable pathways to achieve and sustain a high level of quality, equity, and sustainability—as described in and supported through the District Toolkit—district leaders can also support pathway quality by demonstrating leadership in the following areas:

- Training support
 - ConnectEd provides training on the Essential Elements, use of OPTIC, and a variety of other topics related to the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process. District leaders can identify the teacher leaders, site and district administrators, coaches, and partners who would benefit from this training and then ensure that those individuals have designated time, resources, and support to complete the training and pursue the review and certification process in a fully informed and supported way.
- Coach support
 - Improving pathway quality requires sustained effort by a high-functioning pathway community of practice that has adequate common planning time to use available data to inform their practice. A pathway coach can provide critical support. Improving pathway quality also requires ongoing support from site and district administrators. District leaders can play an active leadership role in identifying, and then supporting both internal and external coaches to participate in the ConnectEd coach training and certification process so that they may be well qualified to serve in these capacities.
- Coordination of and support for continuous self-assessment
 - OPTIC provides an online space for pathway teams to self-assess their quality against the Essential Elements, and then develop, pursue, and monitor progress on an action plan for improvement. It is helpful for district leaders to play an active coordination and support role. By doing so, they can monitor and support pathway continuous improvements. For district-level users, OPTIC provides an aggregate view of pathway self-assessments that can be instrumental in helping district leaders to identify (a) common areas of growth across pathways that may inform the need for district-wide professional development and/or greater systems support, and (b) pathways that are excelling in specific Essential Elements and may be able to share promising practices with those pathways that are less developed in those areas.

- Data support
 - Pathway continuous improvement depends upon teachers having regular access to data and having the capacity to analyze and use data to inform practice and decision making. District leaders can commit to putting data in the hands of teachers and providing the training necessary to promote its regular use.
- Continuous feedback
 - District leaders can establish forums to facilitate consistent communication between and among pathway leads, site administrators, and district leaders. Cycles of inquiry and feedback, paired with open lines of communication, are critically important for pathway leaders to know that their voices and needs are being heard and that site and district administrators are doing everything possible to remove roadblocks and support high-quality pathway implementation. Establishing and maintaining these structured (and unstructured) forums for regular communication demonstrates a shared commitment to serving students, improving outcomes, and being strategic and systematic doing so.
- Review of evidence
 - During the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process, ConnectEd expects district leaders to validate that a pathway meets the majority of the sub-elements of each of the seven Essential Elements. The training offered by ConnectEd, which includes the district validation process, includes a review of evidence.

Continuous Improvement Cycle Using OPTIC

Improving pathway quality is a continuous process, whether a pathway is new or has been operating for thirty years; whether it has small or large student enrollment; whether it is focused on health, engineering, law and justice, or another theme; whether it is a California Partnership Academy, National Academy Foundation academy, small career-themed school, or another delivery model; and whether it is already certified or not. Research shows that when pathways are of high quality, equitably accessible, and sustainable, students are well served and student outcomes improve. When student outcomes improve, our schools, families, communities, colleges, employers, and society all benefit. As such, the continuous improvement process is just that: continuous. It never stops. The Online Pathway Tool for Improvement and Certification (or OPTIC) was designed uniquely to support the pathway improvement process and keep all stakeholders – pathway teachers, counselors, site and district administrators, coaches, and advisory board members – focused on that goal.

Accessing OPTIC

To use OPTIC, and other features of ConnectEd Studios, all users must establish an account. If you do not already have an account, you may either (a) go to ConnectEd Studios and request an account by clicking on the “Register now!” link in the Login area in the upper right corner, or (b) ask your district’s ConnectEd Studios administrator to establish an account for you. If you already have an account, but forgot your password, you may go to the same Login area and click on “Forgot your password?” to receive a new one. Once you have established an account, login to ConnectEd Studios, and set up your profile. Your profile includes your district, school, pathway, and several other fields of information.

Now it is time to access OPTIC. Once you have established your profile, go to the “More” pull-down menu, and select “OPTIC.” Based on information in your ConnectEd Studios profile, you should see your school name and pathway name. Click on the pathway name. If you do not see your school and pathway, please ConnectEd and request that he add your school and pathway to the master list within OPTIC.

When you enter OPTIC, you will land on your pathway’s own home page, which includes your “wall” where you can post notices, a list (and photo, if uploaded) of each pathway team member, and reminders. You can view and download various versions of each Essential Element, its descriptors, and its developmental rubric. Across the top, you will see the various features of OPTIC, including the Data Center, self-assessment and action plan, and evidence. See more details about how to navigate and use those features in the sections below.

Finally, once you have a ConnectEd Studios account, you will have full access to its many features. To learn more, view any of a series of archived webinars.

Self-Assessment

The starting point for any pathway is to assess its level of quality against the Essential Elements. Doing so provides a valuable opportunity for all stakeholders to better understand what defines quality, the strengths of the pathway, and its areas for growth. Ideally, the self-assessment would be a collaborative process involving not only pathway teachers, but also counselors, site administrators, the pathway coach, advisory board members, and other stakeholders. By being inclusive, the self-assessment becomes a learning opportunity for all involved, as it invites candid discussions about equity, scalability, use of data, learning and teaching, evidence, and so much more – all the while keeping students at the center.

Once you take time to discuss processes and establish expectations and norms, it is time to begin your self-assessment. When you enter OPTIC, click on the “Self-Assessment & Action Plan” tab. If there are no active self-assessments, you can click on the button marked “Create a New Self-Assessment.” The tool is quite intuitive. The plus (+) button on the right expands the Element, exposing the general descriptor and the four columns of the developmental rubric for each of the sub-elements. At the bottom-right corner, there is a “Go to Summary” button, whenever you want to see a complete picture of your self-assessment. Using the “Export PDF” button in the upper-right corner, you can upload a printable version. ConnectEd Studios always saves your work; there is no need to worry about it getting lost.

Action Planning

After the self-assessment is complete, a summary can be viewed by either clicking on the “Go to Summary” button on the bottom right or selecting “Current Self-Assessment Summary” from the “Self-Assessment & Action Plan” tab on the top. On the summary, you can select the view you prefer by clicking on the column headers. For example, if you would like all of the “beginning and emerging” sub-elements to populate on top of the summary, just click on the “Assessment” header. Finally, based on information entered on your action plan, OPTIC automatically generates reminders. For example, if an individual user has an action step due next week, that individual will receive a reminder on his/her OPTIC home page.

Pathway Improvements

Building an action plan is one thing; completing it in an effective and timely fashion is another. The pathway team will have to actively monitor progress in order to improve pathway quality over time. This will require sustained commitment and dedicated effort on the part of most or all of the pathway’s team members. It will also require active support from site and district administrators, advisory board members, and other colleagues. On the top-left corner of the action plan, you will find a “Helpful Tools” button with a link to assets in the Pathway Toolkit in ConnectEd Studios. Those tools align specifically to the sub-element selected for improvement.

Evidence Collection

As the pathway team completes its self-assessment and action items included in its action plan, it is wise to gather (or at least cite in the notes section) specific pieces of evidence that demonstrate that the pathway, in fact, is meeting and advancing on each sub-element. By identifying and jointly examining evidence for each claim of quality, the pathway team can check itself against the tendency to rate the quality of each sub-element based on less-substantiated reasons.

For some sub-elements it may be easier to find evidence to support a claim than for others. Some sub-elements are quite complex – e.g., those in the Learning and Teaching Element. As such, some sub-elements may only require a single piece of evidence; some may require several.

In OPTIC, pathway team members may use the “Evidence” tab to both see a list of recommended evidence and upload evidence for each sub-element. To access this feature, simply click on the “Evidence” tab on the top of the page. Once you do, you’ll see the Essential Elements and sub-elements listed. Pathway teams can attach a “reflective overview” for an Essential Element and/or specific pieces of evidence associated with each of the sub-elements. When you click on “Attach evidence” for any one of the sub-elements, you will see the rubric language on the left and examples of evidence on the right. Below, there is a button that says “Attach Files or URLs.” When you click that button, a list of previously uploaded evidence will appear on the left, and a form for uploading new evidence on the right. From the form, you can browse and find a file on your computer, link to a URL, or select a file that was previously uploaded, perhaps as evidence for another sub-element. At the bottom of the OPTIC evidence page, there is space to write an explanatory note, which is valuable for contextualization not only for pathway team members, but eventually for external reviewers.

Development of and Access to the Data Center

Data is an essential driver for any continuous improvement process. As such, it is important for all pathway team members to have ongoing access to student-level data and have the capacity to generate both standard and customized reports, interpret and analyze data, and use it to inform practice and make decisions.

In OPTIC, there are two ways to enter data into the Data Center:

1. Import from the Institute of Evidence-Based Change

For districts that have an agreement with the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC) and regularly upload data files, their pathways have access to the IEBC In-SITES tool to analyze pathway-level data. Training and technical assistance are available through IEBC. The district’s ConnectEd Studios administrator has access to an upload button on OPTIC that simultaneously uploads all In-SITES data for all pathways across the district. Once the administrator clicks that button, about 95% of the fields in the Data Center become prepopulated.

2. Manual Entry

For districts that do not have an agreement with IEBC, pathways will have to work with site and district leaders to access necessary data and manually enter it into OPTIC. To do so, click on the “Edit Data” button in the upper-right corner of the Data Center and enter data into the appropriate fields.

Certification Cycle Using DigCert

As educators, parents, and members of society, we want to ensure that every child has the best possible education in order to prepare him/her for success in college, career, and life. Linked Learning offers a promising set of strategies for doing so. But, only when pathways are of high quality and equitably accessible, are sustained through transitions in leadership, and meet current industry standards can we be assured that students will meet college- and career-ready outcomes. By certifying pathways, ConnectEd and the many partners in the Linked Learning field aspire to transform education one pathway and one district at a time.

In order to become certified, a pathway must holistically reach the “meeting and advancing” column of the developmental rubric for each and every one of the seven Essential Elements.

Initiating the Process

Once a pathway team has been through multiple cycles of continuous improvement and there is consensus among pathway team members, the pathway coach, site administrators, the district Linked Learning or pathway director, and advisory board members that it can demonstrate that it meets the majority of the sub-elements in all seven Essential Elements, then it is time to transition from the continuous improvement cycle to the certification cycle and pursue Linked Learning certification. The pathway lead, a site administrator, or a district administrator should be designated to initiate the pathway certification process. While the Digital Certification Tool, or DigCert, is linked to OPTIC, it exists on ConnectEd Studios as a separate feature. To initiate the process, the designated leader should log on to ConnectEd Studios. Under the “More” pull-down menu, select “Digital Certification.” Then, on the top, click on the link that says “New Request for Pathway Quality Review.” From there, the designated leader will complete the online form and click the “Submit” button.

District Validation

After initiating the process, the first step is for pathway and site leaders to cooperate with district leaders as they review evidence and validate that the pathway is, in fact, ready to pursue pathway certification. ConnectEd provides training for district leaders responsible for completing the

district validation, which is a component of the initial orientation. District leaders may wish to consult with the ConnectEd-assigned Lead Reviewer throughout the district validation process. Doing so will ensure coordination and shared expectations.

Preliminary Review of Evidence

Once the district validates that the pathway is ready to proceed with the next step of the certification process, it is time to more fully engage the ConnectEd-assigned Lead Reviewer. The Lead Reviewer will work collaboratively with pathway, site, and district leaders to conduct a preliminary review of evidence. He/she should complete that review within a two-week timeframe and then provide feedback.

The Lead Reviewer will determine and articulate a desired process, but often will begin with a request for an initial meeting with representative pathway teachers, site administrators, and district leaders to learn more about the pathway's history, meet key staff, begin to establish a positive rapport, set a collaborative tone, and understand the process and the results of the district validation phase. The Lead Reviewer will also establish communication protocols to maintain through the process.

During the preliminary review process, the Lead Reviewer will have access to OPTIC to examine the evidence to determine the degree to which the evidence adequately demonstrates that the pathway is meeting each of the sub-elements. During the review, the Lead Reviewer may reach out to the pathway, site, and/or district leaders if he/she has questions and/or requests for additional information.

Upon completion of the preliminary evidence review, the Lead Reviewer will submit to the pathway comprehensive and specific feedback, which is intended to offer both commendations and helpful recommendations. Ultimately, the Lead Reviewer will determine if the pathway is ready to proceed with an external site visit. If the pathway is *not* ready to proceed, the Lead Reviewer will be available for further consultation and technical assistance, upon request.

Preparing for the Site Visit

If and when the Lead Reviewer determines that the pathway is ready to proceed with a site visit, he/she will work with pathway, site, and district leaders to establish the dates for the visit and a schedule. Typically, the site visit is a day and a half and includes the Lead Reviewer with at least one other review team member. At times, additional Lead Reviewers or observers may participate in the site visit. Observers may be lead teachers or administrators from other Linked Learning schools and districts who are eager to better understand the review process in order to inform their own preparation. Or, they may be ConnectEd staff, coaches, or community partners. Their role is to observe, not to contribute to the assessments made by review team members.

The site visit includes classroom visits, focus groups, and interviews. Based on the results of the preliminary evidence review and the areas identified for further observation or deeper understanding, the Lead Reviewer may request interviews with specific individuals, focus groups with specific stakeholders, and/or observation of specific classes.

Site Visit

The site visit serves as the opportunity for an external review team to validate a pathway's quality. If the team is able to validate that the pathway meets all seven of the Essential Elements, then the pathway becomes Linked Learning certified. Certification is *not* intended to be the end of the road for the Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review and Certification Process, but rather a snapshot at a point in time that ultimately informs the return to the continuous improvement cycle. While certification is not the end of the road, it does represent a significant accomplishment of a milestone that is worth celebrating. Prior to the site visit, the Lead Reviewer will consult with other review team members to determine the sub-elements about which they are eager to learn more. Based on those areas of further inquiry or examination, the Lead Reviewer and the pathway lead/director will develop a visit schedule. The schedule typically combines classroom visits, interviews, focus groups, and other meetings. In addition, the review team may ask to examine additional evidence.

Final Report

Within approximately six weeks from the time of the site visit, the pathway lead, along with site and district administrators, will receive the final report from the Lead Reviewer. Specifically, the draft completed by the Lead Reviewer is sent to another Lead Reviewer for editing. Then, that draft is sent to the district Linked Learning director, who is asked to engage with the pathway lead/director and perhaps a site administrator to check for factual accuracy. With their input, the draft is finalized and a cover letter is crafted to accompany the report.

The final report includes a decision about Linked Learning certification and cites both commendations and recommendations. It is intended to recognize and celebrate the tremendous efforts of the pathway team and their site and district leaders and community partners to develop a high-quality pathway that accomplishes the goal of preparing students for success in college, career, and life. It is also intended to recommend some areas of growth to inform further continuous improvement.

If the pathway has demonstrated some areas of "exemplary practice," these areas will be highlighted in the final report, and ConnectEd may request to post some of the associated evidence in the Pathway Toolkit as examples of promising practices. If the pathway is certified, then the final report will be accompanied by suggestions of how to publicly celebrate the accomplishment.

If the pathway is *not* certified, the final report and associated cover letter will be very specific about where enhancements would be necessary in order to become certified. Either the Lead Reviewer or a representative from ConnectEd will contact district, site, and pathway leaders immediately to determine a process for supporting further improvements in specified areas and determining a desired schedule for a follow-up review of evidence and/or site visit in order to certify the pathway in the near future.

A Linked Learning certification is valid for three years, at which time the pathway will return to the certification cycle to (hopefully) renew its certification. A recertification may be abbreviated, dependent upon a variety of factors – trends in achievement data, shifts in pathway staff, changes in school and district conditions, etc.

Return to Continuous Improvement Cycle

While the final report recognizes and celebrates the many areas of pathway quality, it also identifies some areas of growth that should be the focus on the pathway's next action plan for improvement, thereby returning to the continuous improvement cycle.