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
Preparation (1-3 months)

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 workplace, 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
  • District leaders can identify the teacher leaders, site and district administrators, coaches, and partners who would benefit from the ConnectEd training above 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. District leaders may wish to consider the following questions:
    ▪ How can we leverage this training to build internal capacity?
    ▪ How can we leverage this training to strengthen our communities of practice?
    ▪ What is our strategy for onboarding new pathway teachers, counselors, site and district leaders, coaches, and advisory board members to ensure that all involved in pathways continue to be well informed and prepared to support and sustain pathway quality?
    ▪ What conditions need to be created and supported to ensure optimum participation by all stakeholders?

• 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. District leaders may wish to consider the following questions:
    ▪ Is the district prepared to allocate resources to support the funding of internal coaches dedicated to Linked Learning?
    ▪ How can we select and train the most qualified individuals to serve as pathway coaches?
    ▪ How can we ensure that our pathway coaches are effective?
    ▪ How can we invest in continuing professional growth to strengthen coach capacity and effectiveness?
    ▪ Are there opportunities to cross-train instructional coaches and others to also serve as Linked Learning pathway coaches?
• How can we be strategic about leveraging and expanding the mentoring and support role that site administrators are expected to play?

• How can district leadership align existing initiatives or priorities with Linked Learning pathway practices to ensure the work at the site aligns with district expectations?

• 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 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 districtwide 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. District leaders may wish to consider the following questions:
    • How frequently should all district pathways self-assess their progress/quality?
    • At what time of year does it make sense for all pathways to self-assess?
    • What role should the pathway coach play in assisting with the self-assessment and action-planning process?
    • How can coaching plans and pathway team meetings be designed to support the continuous improvement process?

• 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. District leaders may wish to consider the following questions:
    • How can district leaders ensure that pathway teachers, counselors, and site administrators have “just-in-time” access to student-level data?
    • What kind of ongoing training do teachers, counselors, and site administrators need to give them the ability and confidence to access data, generate customized reports, analyze data, and use data to inform practice and decision making?

• 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 in doing so. District leaders may wish to consider the following questions:

- Are there forums that already exist, or could be repurposed, to provide opportunities for pathway teachers and site leaders to surface needs and request support?
- How can district leaders create and/or support communities of practice designed to promote shared learning (e.g., among pathway leads, among site principals, among counselors) that support improvement in pathway quality?
- How can district leaders design opportunities for pathway, site, and district leaders to co-construct strategies, plans, or guiding documents in a collaborative way?

- 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 (6 months to 4 years)**

The continuous improvement process is just that: continuous. It never stops, whether a pathway is new or established, uncertified or certified. 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. Research shows that when pathways are high quality, equitably accessible, and sustainable, students are well served and student outcomes improve. When student outcomes improve, we all benefit.

**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, log in to ConnectEd Studios and set up your profile. Your profile includes your district, school, pathway, and several other fields of information.

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 contact 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 photos, if uploaded) of pathway team members, 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 is 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.

Before launching into OPTIC to complete your self-assessment, there are several questions you may wish to address as a pathway team:

- **FACILITATION**: Who has been designated to facilitate the process? What role will the pathway coach play?

- **INCLUSION**: Who should be included in the self-assessment process to promote shared learning, broad input, and capacity building?

- **TIME ALLOCATION**: How much time has been allocated to complete the process? How will you ensure that there is adequate time to have the necessary conversations in order to come to consensus? How will you “chunk” the work so that the team is not overwhelmed by attempting to do it all at once?

- **PROCESS**: What process will you use? For example, will you all sit around the table and discuss each sub-element, one by one? Will you request that pathway team members do independent assessments first and then discuss as a team and come to consensus? Will you expect the team to gather (or at least cite) evidence to support your claims about levels of development for each sub-element?

- **NORMS**: Are there some norms to adhere to in order to stay focused on continuous improvement, ensure mutual support and collaboration, and continue to strengthen the pathway’s community of practice?

- **SITE AND DISTRICT LEADERSHIP SUPPORT**: Have site and/or district leaders provided any guidance or suggestions about when and how to conduct the pathway self-assessment? What support role would
you like site and district leaders to play? Who will convey requested support and how will it be conveyed?

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 for 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.

Remember, you can always use your pathway’s “wall” to communicate with one another – e.g., send reminders, ask questions, or comment on strategies that you found to be useful. It is an alternative collaboration space when you cannot meet face-to-face.

### 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. To reverse the order, click on it again.

Before creating an action plan, the team will need to decide on three to five sub-elements that warrant the most attention for improvement. To help you decide, the team may wish to discuss the following questions:

- Which sub-element(s) will provide the most high-leverage, high-impact opportunity to improve student outcomes and/or professional practice? In other words, which sub-element, if improved upon, may yield positive results for other sub-elements as well?

- Which sub-element(s) seem to be in the pathway’s proximal zone of development? In other words, which sub-element(s) do you feel most prepared to address effectively and on which you can and will make progress?

When you select the sub-elements that you wish to focus on for your action plan, click the checkbox in the right-most column. Then, from the “Self-Assessment & Action Plan” tab on top, click the pull-down menu and select “Current Action Plan.” The sub-elements you selected will be prepopulated. On the right side, you can expand the box by clicking on the “+” button. From there, you can begin to build your action plan by entering the action item leader, due date, goal, notes, and any number
of action steps. Once you add one action step, you can click on the “Add Action Step” button on the bottom to add another. For each action step, you can enter the step, person responsible, resources needed, success indicator, due date, and notes. Based on the due date you establish, a “status” automatically will be populated (e.g., completed, on schedule, behind schedule). You may also manually adjust the “status” on each action step. 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.

While pursuing its action plan, the pathway team may wish to discuss the following questions to guide its pathway improvement process:

- What are the expectations for distributed leadership? How will team members share the workload in a way that is fair and also considers the skills, experiences, and strengths that each team member brings?

- What tools will best assist the team in identifying and monitoring areas of progress? Who will have the primary responsibility of calling to the team’s attention the lack of progress?

- How can the team use its regular meetings to monitor progress on the action plan? What is the means by which individual team members can ask for assistance, if they need it, and/or get input from others so that they can complete their assigned action step(s)?

- What happens if the pathway is not making progress on one or more of its action items? How will the team overcome hurdles or roadblocks? At what point will the team request support from site or district administrators or advisory board members?

- What role will the pathway coach play to support the monitoring and completion of action steps? How can that support be explicit in his/her coaching plan to create an opportunity for mutual accountability?

- How will the pathway team decide that it is time to “refresh” the action plan by adding new action items and action steps? Should that only happen after a new self-assessment, or can it be a midyear update between self-assessments?

Evidence Collection
As the pathway team completes its self-assessment and action items, 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.

For some sub-elements it may be easier to find evidence to support a claim than for others. Some sub-elements are quite complex, like 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.

As pathway teams consider the evidence they will need to support a claim of quality, they may wish to consider the following questions:

- During the self-assessment process, what should be the expectation for uploading evidence to demonstrate that a pathway is “meeting and advancing” or “excelling and sustaining”? When monitoring progress on the pathway’s action plan, what should be the expectations for uploading evidence to demonstrate completion of an action item?

- Who will judge the quality of the evidence? How can the process of judging the quality of evidence become a collaborative one that promotes shared learning, capacity building, and strengthening the pathway community of practice?

- What role might a pathway coach, site leader, district leader, and/or advisory board member play in helping to judge whether evidence is good evidence?

- What tools, models, or samples of good evidence can the team members access to ensure they are on the right path as they upload their evidence?

**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.

Data comes in many forms. The data represented in the Data Center of OPTIC is standard data – e.g., enrollment, socio-demographic information, attendance, behavior, test scores, and postsecondary plans. Other forms of data include student survey results, student work, and interviews. OPTIC captures the former set of indicators. The latter types of data may also be gathered by pathway teams and cited as evidence to demonstrate pathway quality.

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.

As pathway teams think about data and how they will use it to drive a continuous improvement process and inform shifts in practice, they may wish to consider the following questions:

• Do pathway teachers have easy access to the kinds of data they need to inform continuous improvement? If not, how can they gain access?

• Do pathway teachers have the capacity to use data to inform practice and make decisions? If not, what kind of training may they need to develop that capacity?

• If pathway teachers have access to data and the capacity to use it effectively, how is the pathway team using it? What routinized processes and supporting structures are in place to promote data-driven practice?

• What role might a pathway coach or site or district leader play to support effective use of data for purposes of continuous improvement?

• Are pathway teachers actively engaged in developing formative assessments that support the continuous improvement process?

• What different strategies do pathway teachers use to secure feedback that will inform the continuous improvement process?
Certification Cycle Using DigCert (4-6 months)
Linked Learning offers a promising set of strategies to ensure that every child has the best possible education in order to prepare him or her for success in college, career, and life. 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.

Getting to this high level of quality generally takes a pathway at least three to four years from inception, and in some cases, much longer. The good news is that, through ConnectEd Studios, and resources provided by numerous partner organizations in the Linked Learning field, there are many great tools and promising practices available to pathways to assist in their development and continuous improvement efforts.

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 to ensure coordination and shared expectations.
While there is no one recommended process for district validation, colleagues in districts have offered several suggestions:

- **Simple evidence review**
  - Form a team of reviewers who will replicate the external evidence review process. The team could be selected from among teachers and coaches from other pathways in the school or district, site leaders, district leaders, and partners. Like the external reviewers, the evidence review team would examine evidence available on the DigCert tool, assess its quality, and provide feedback to the pathway team on the degree to which they believe the evidence is compelling enough to demonstrate the pathway’s meeting each sub-element. In a collaborative and supportive way, when they believe the evidence is not adequately compelling, the reviewers could discuss alternative options for evidence and/or identify examples from other pathways that may better serve the purpose. If the pathway team or the team of evidence reviewers thinks the pathway should take more time to develop other, better forms of evidence, the evidence review team may offer to continue to support the pathway through that extended process.

- **Mock review**
  - Form a team of reviewers who will replicate the external evidence review and site visitation process. The team could be selected from among teachers and coaches from other pathways in the school or district, site leaders, district leaders, and partners. Like the external reviewers, the mock review team would review evidence and prepare for a visit by identifying gaps in evidence that they wish to pursue further; generating questions for student, teacher, parent, and/or partner focus groups; and identifying pathway quality features to look for during classroom observations. This strategy gives the pathway team a chance to fully prepare for an eventual external visit and anticipate questions. It also provides an opportunity for pathway, site, and district leaders to deepen their understanding of the Essential Elements, examine the characteristics of high-quality evidence, and prepare to be on the “receiving end” of a certification visit.

- **Cross-district review**
  - Pursue either of the options above, but do so with a team from another school district. This option may seem more “real,” as the reviewers are external to the district.

Before determining what kind of district validation process to pursue, pathway, site, and district leaders may wish to discuss the following questions:

- How can the district be thoughtful about the validation process by using a strategy that promotes shared learning, builds internal capacity, and strengthens communities of practice?

- How can the district be intentional about the tone that it sets? What tone would be most desirable to meet the intended outcomes of district validation? Does the district prefer to establish the district validation process as a form of intensive support or as a form of compliance? Is it best to keep the tone light, fun, and collaborative? Or, is it more beneficial to make the validation high-stakes, tense, and challenging? There may be good arguments for both. Which would the pathway prefer?

- How will the district provide ongoing support to the pathway if the review team determines that the pathway would benefit from identifying, generating, and/or uploading additional evidence and/or
cycling back to do another self-assessment and continuing with pathway improvement before pursuing certification? How will they communicate if the pathway is not yet ready to proceed with the rest of the certification process? In this circumstance, what process will the district use to reengage with the pathway at a later date to validate its readiness?

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 throughout 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.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that there are several forms of evidence to demonstrate that a pathway has met the criteria to become Linked Learning certified. Up until this point, this Guide has focused on artifacts (e.g., documents, videos, student work). The preliminary evidence review only pays attention to available artifacts. Other forms of evidence include results of interviews, focus groups, and classroom visits. These additional forms of evidence will be examined during the site visit.

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 lasts 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. Sample schedules are attached in Appendices A and B.

Depending on the visit schedule, pathway, site, and/or district leaders will need to make a number of arrangements that may include, but are not limited to

- arranging for substitutes for some pathway teachers;
- reserving a meeting room for focus groups and a work room for the review team;
- inviting students, parents, site administrators, district leaders, advisory board members, and potentially other support staff and partners to be available for a focus group or interviews;
- informing teachers about the likelihood of classroom visits;
- providing additional evidence, upon request;
- arranging lunch;
- designating parking spaces, as necessary;
- alerting all school staff about the visit; and
- making other arrangements, as requested by the Lead Reviewer.

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.

While the pathway team and site and district leaders may be inclined to interpret the visit as a form of compliance, the Lead Reviewer will do his/her best to set a tone consistent with the ultimate goal of continuous improvement. That is to say, while Linked Learning certification is an important result for all involved in the visit, the in-depth examination of pathway quality results in commendations and recommendations in the final report that will inform ongoing continuous improvement regardless of the certification decision.

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 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. It is natural for a pathway team to take a minute to exhale after a site visit. They should do so; it’s well deserved. But before too much time lapses, the team should review the final report, consider what the report offers to inform the next iteration of their action-planning and improvement process, and cycle back into OPTIC to create their next action plan.

Appendices
Sample Site Visit Schedules: See Below
## Appendix: Sample Schedule #1
for a Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review Site Visit

### Day 1: (Insert Date)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Room #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. (60 min)*  | Lunch          | Opening Meeting .................................................................... (Insert room #)  
District, school, and pathway leadership (lunch provided)  |        |
| 12:30 p.m. – 1:18 p.m. (48 min)   | Period 3       | Classroom Visits  
9th-grade CTE class ................................................................. (Insert room #)  
You and the Law ........................................................................... (Insert room #)  
10th-grade CTE class ...................................................................... (Insert room #)  
11th-12th-grade CTE class ............................................................. (Insert room #)  |        |
| 1:23 p.m. – 2:09 p.m. (46 min)   | Advisory       | Advisory Classroom Visits  
9th grade ...................................................................................(Insert room #)  
10th grade ...................................................................................(Insert room #)  
11th grade ...................................................................................(Insert room #)  
12th grade ...................................................................................(Insert room #)  |        |
| 2:14 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. (76 min)   | Period 4       | Focus Group – Pathway staff (10th grade team) ......................... (Insert room #)  |        |
| 3:30 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.            |                 | Break                                                           |        |
| 4:00 p.m. – 4:45 p.m. (45 min)   | After school   | Focus Group – Pathway Business Advisory Board ......................... (Insert room #)  |        |
| 5:00 p.m. – 5:45 p.m. (45 min)   | After school   | Focus Group – Pathway parents ................................................... (Insert room #)  
(Refreshments will be provided.)                                 |        |
## Day 2: (Insert Date)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Room #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30 a.m. – 8:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Before school</td>
<td>Opening Meeting .........................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:45 a.m. – 10:14 a.m. (89 min)</td>
<td>Period 1</td>
<td>Focus Group – Pathway staff (9th-grade team) ...........................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom visits ..........................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pathway staff and staff (9th-grade team) ...................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:19 a.m. – 11:48 a.m. (89 min)</td>
<td>Period 2</td>
<td>Classroom Visits</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9th-grade English ..................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11th-grade English ..................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Precalculus ...............................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11th-grade AP art studio ...........................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ROP class ...................................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:53 a.m. – 12:23 p.m. (30 min)</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Focus Group – Pathway students and staff (lunch provided) .........................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:28 p.m. – 1:57 p.m. (89 min)</td>
<td>Period 3</td>
<td>Focus Groups – Pathway students ..................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus Groups – Pathway staff (11th-grade team) .........................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Geometry ......................................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Earth science .............................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CAHSEE math ..............................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CTE class ....................................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:45 p.m. – 2:15 p.m. (30 min)*</td>
<td>Period 4</td>
<td>Review team meeting with pathway, school, and district leadership ...............</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15 p.m. – 3:45 p.m. (90 min)*</td>
<td>Period 5</td>
<td>Review team meeting ....................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:45 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. (15 min)*</td>
<td>After school</td>
<td>Discussion and debriefing with key staff ..................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Refreshments will be provided.)

*Time allocations required for review team members.
## Appendix: Sample Schedule #2
for a Linked Learning Pathway Quality Review Site Visit

### Day 1: (Insert Date)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Room #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11:45 a.m. – 1:15 p.m.</td>
<td>Lunch: Opening meeting—district, school, and pathway leadership...........................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Classroom visits (6th period).....................................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Staff focus group (includes classified and certificated staff)................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Day 2: (Insert Date)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Room #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7:30 a.m. – 8:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Breakfast: Review team meeting ..........................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00 a.m. – 8:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Parent/family focus group interview ..................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Pathway partners focus group interview—Business Advisory Board ........................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 a.m. – Noon</td>
<td>Classroom visits (3rd period)..................................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noon – 12:45 p.m.</td>
<td>Lunch........................................................................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:45 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.</td>
<td>Student focus group ..............................................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Review team meeting with school and pathway leadership...........................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Final review team meeting......................................................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:30 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Final discussion and debriefing—principal, pathway leadership, key staff, district lead .................................................................</td>
<td>(Insert room #)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>