



# CAPS NETWORK

*Blue Valley School District*

The CAPS model provides real-world, profession-based learning opportunities through collaborations with business and community partners to prepare students for college and career.

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## OVERVIEW

The Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) integrates high school, college, and career into a single seamless community where students can explore pathways while working with professionals on real-world projects. Students fast-forward into their future and are fully immersed in a professional culture by solving real-world problems, using industry standard tools, and being mentored by actual employers, all while receiving high school and college credit. CAPS is an example of how business, community, and public education can partner to produce personalized learning experiences that educate the workforce of tomorrow, especially in high-skill, high-demand jobs. CAPS creates rich and meaningful experiences for students as well as industry and postsecondary partners.

The CAPS model is grounded in its five core values:

- Profession-Based Learning (Pro-BL): Real-world, project-based learning through collaboration with community and business partners.
- Professional Skills Development: Students cultivate transformative professional skills such as understanding expectations and time management.
- Self-Discovery and Exploration: Students realize their strengths and passions by exploring and experiencing potential professions.
- Entrepreneurial Mindset: An environment where creative thinking and problem-solving is encouraged.
- Responsiveness: Ongoing innovation in curriculum development, programs, and services based on local business and community needs.



The model began in 2009 with the creation of Blue Valley School District's CAPS in Overland Park, Kansas. CAPS now reaches 170 school districts in 23 states and four countries. [▶ CAPS Story Trailer](#)  
[▶ Where Students Lead Trailer](#) [▶ CAPS Network Storyboard](#)

## What Makes This Model Innovative?



### Relevance

CAPS students work on client-connected projects in authentic contexts. Students have opportunities to explore different industries and pursue pathways that are of interest to them.



### Active Self-Direction

CAPS students drive their learning and develop agency by planning, managing, and executing real-world projects for clients.



### Rigorous Learning

In Pro-BL, students use critical thinking skills to make deep meaning of complex ideas and apply, analyze, and use their knowledge in unique and authentic contexts.

## DESIGN

### Goals

At CAPS, students build the professional skills needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world—to not only survive, but to thrive in the future. [Professional Skills and Competencies](#)

#### Essential Competencies

Essential competencies are the transferable cognitive skills that students must leverage in any given field. These include analytical thinking, collaboration, communication, complex problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking, innovation, and teamwork.

#### Entrepreneurial Mindset

An entrepreneurial mindset is exhibited through thinking creatively and innovatively, and challenging the status quo. These include adaptability, curiosity, initiative, leadership, lifelong learning, and resilience.

#### Social skills

Social skills are critical to networking, building social capital, and providing students a competitive advantage in their postsecondary education and professional careers. These include emotional intelligence, empathy, engagement, relationship development, and respect.

#### Technical Skills

Most jobs are highly specialized, with each job requiring a set of specific skills and their own vocabulary and processes that make them unique to each other. CAPS offers specialized Strands in various disciplines—bioscience, engineering, human services, medicine & health care, business, and more.

## Experience

The CAPS model leverages profession-based learning (Pro-BL) to engage students in relevant, authentic learning. Pro-BL is a pedagogical approach in which students spend a semester or more demonstrating their skills and knowledge through profession-based projects. Unlike project-based learning (PBL) and problem-based learning (Pr-BL), in Pro-BL students work on a real task with a client. [📖 Characteristics and Elements of Pro-BL](#)

### Profession-Based Learning

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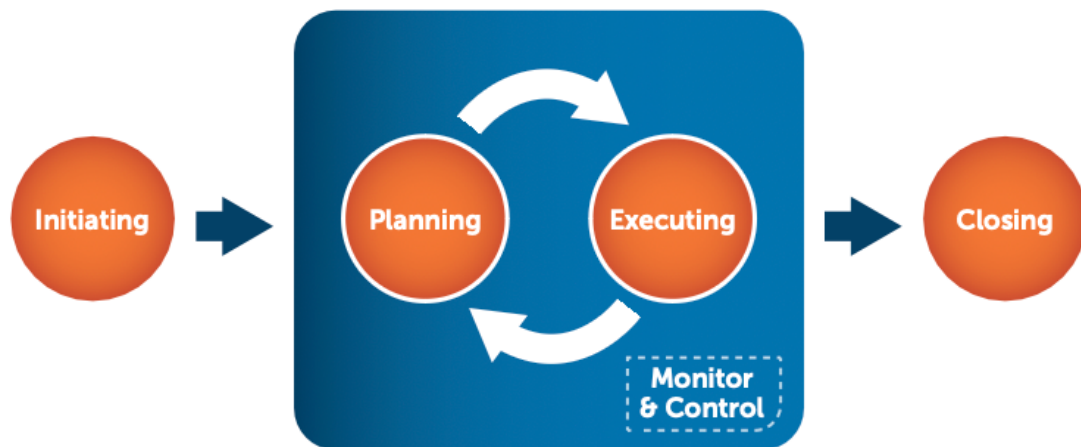
While profession-based learning at CAPS can take many forms, almost all of them include client-connected projects in which students work to solve a real problem for an industry partner. Projects are developed with industry partners and create a bounded environment in which students can experiment with ideas and work through simulated scenarios that hew closely to the kinds of problems they will work through in the professional world. Students work on projects they are passionate about while using industry standard tools. Through this process, they have an opportunity to problem-solve and increase knowledge through collaboration with peers, instructors, and community members. At the end of this process, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills by working together to develop a product or presentation that they then share with an audience. This process facilitates students' development of content knowledge, critical thinking skills, creativity, team-building, and communications skills while simultaneously giving them the opportunity to deliver a tangible result. [▶ CAPS Network: Impact of Experimentation](#)



Industry partners design projects within the capabilities of the student and the learning objectives of the Strand in which they participate. A Strand is a term used to identify a cluster of related courses that are included in a general discipline. Each CAPS affiliate may offer different Strands. Examples of CAPS strands offered across the network include animal health; bioscience; data analytics; engineering; food and agriculture; global business; health care and medicine; innovation; law and public service; logistics; media; teacher education; and technology. [📖 CAPS Playbook Module 2: Diving into Profession-Based Learning](#)

Since each project is specific to a real problem and real client, projects will vary in length and complexity. Regardless of the type of project, all students and their clients benefit from the use of the project cycle to plan their work (project plan) and work their plan. [🖥️ Student Projects](#)

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- **Initiating:** All projects begin with a meeting with the client. Students take notes and determine specific requirements of the project to help develop a plan.
- **Planning:** Students develop specific tasks that will achieve the requirements of the project. Tasks must be time-bound based on the complexity and length of the project.
- **Executing:** Students perform the work defined in each task. They note outcomes that differ from the original plan and adjust the future tasks accordingly.
- **Monitoring & Controlling:** Students provide on-the-spot daily or weekly status reports on the completion of the tasks as they occur. These can be written or verbal depending on the complexity of the project.
- **Closing:** To conclude the project, students complete the final tasks and achieve the requirements. They summarize the experience in a report to the client including both “good” and “bad” news. They should also consider and plan any next steps for continuation.

Though client-connected projects are the most common method of profession-based learning leveraged, each CAPS affiliate has the autonomy to design programming to best meet the needs of their students and community. Some choose to go deeper into a specific industry or profession through an embedded activity, such as guest instruction, shadowing, or simulation. Sometimes a client-connected project can organically lead to workplace opportunities such as mentorships and internships.

## Supporting Structures

The CAPS model can be integrated into any school design but requires significant shifts in curriculum and instruction, culture, adult roles, and community partnerships, among others. The following supporting structures are essential to making the model work in your community.



**Schools must develop professional Strands, curricula, and real-world learning experiences in collaboration with industry partners.**

To truly serve the economic needs of the local community, each CAPS model must include Strands that reflect the skills and careers needed by surrounding industries. CAPS does not offer a set curriculum but instead

## CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, & ASSESSMENT

helps schools develop their own customized offerings. Schools work in collaboration with industry partners to design Strands and develop curriculum that allow students to engage with the real world and prepare them for the future. Partners provide critical insights and are instrumental in identifying the skills needed to prepare students for the workforce.

Like everything at CAPS, assessments must reflect how students will receive feedback in their future careers (i.e., performance evaluation). As such, assessment is conducted not only by the instructor, but also clients, peers, and students themselves. Students are also provided with multiple opportunities throughout their experience to obtain feedback. The student output from a Pro-BL experience results in a set of artifacts that reflect the objectives of the project. These outputs can be assessed using rubrics built on the definition of success of the experience. Assessment is less about grades and more about receiving feedback and using it to improve. Pro-BL promotes the concept of “failure” as a critical element of learning and focuses on assessing process as well as the artifacts produced. CAPS also encourages showcases or exhibitions to celebrate student work and further facilitate feedback and coaching.

CAPS also directly assesses professional skills that are critical to success in the real world, such as showing up on time, working well with others, and managing ambiguity. In fact, most CAPS affiliates have professional skills as a certain percentage of the grade; at the flagship, BVCAPS, professional skills make up 20% of the grade.

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### **CAPS requires an entrepreneurial, student-led culture that empowers students to drive their learning.**

Successful CAPS programs foster an environment of empowerment where people can empower themselves—act entrepreneurially by taking the lead and facilitating positive change. All involved—instructors, students, administrators, district leaders, and community partners—know that an entrepreneurial approach is valued, encouraged, and rewarded; new ideas are welcome and considered; lines of communication are always open; flexibility is a given; and that some ambiguity is to be expected.



## SCHOOL COMMUNITY & CULTURE

In addition, the culture must be student-powered. This means students’ desires, needs, skills and interests drive learning. Every consideration is given to a culture that will optimize and maximize student learning. Projects and learning are student-led. They are reflective of the student’s interest, passion, other students they would like to partner with, the companies they would like to work with, and the types of projects they are drawn toward. Students are empowered to voice their opinions, give feedback, and share reflections of their learning to inform instructional design.

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**CAPS instructors play the role of facilitator so students can drive their learning. Industry partners play a critical role in designing learning experiences to ensure relevance.**

A CAPS instructor is the “guide on the side” rather than the “sage on the stage.” Instructors give students the autonomy to ask questions that promote deeper learning. They leverage practices such as “management by walking around,” where they “stop by” to talk with students to get a sense of how they perceive things are going. This fosters empowerment by ensuring students feel that what they are thinking and doing matters. Students have the autonomy to solve real problems. This also means that students face real-world experiences of having to navigate a partner’s differences of opinion, workstyle, or expectations. Neither instructors nor partners are expected to hand-hold. Students are held responsible for these interactions, with instructors stepping in only when necessary.



**ADULT ROLES, HIRING,  
& LEARNING**

Though not required, CAPS Network offers various trainings for instructors. Instructors are encouraged to build their knowledge and networks in their specific industries.

- **Instructor Externships:** Working side by side with industry professionals creates opportunities for instructors to enhance industry skills and knowledge, learn new “best practices,” and form professional relationships. This helps them teach students current skills needed to be competitive.
- **Advisory or Steering Committee:** Instructors may form an advisory or steering committee to support designing, launching, and growing their CAPS Strand. Consistent interaction with committee members helps instructors learn about what’s relevant and makes it possible to iterate on the curriculum and experience for students. This gives instructors confidence in their knowledge and a network to further support students.

Successful, mutually beneficial partnerships require planning and diligence. A critical step is designating someone to build and manage partnerships. If funds are available, hiring a business development specialist or community liaison is ideal. This person can onboard partners; explain the program to students, parents, and potential supporters; provide site tours; introduce prospective business partners to instructors and students; and manage relationships.

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## Creative scheduling is required to ensure students have ample time to engage in profession-based learning and core academics.

While the CAPS model does not require a specific scheduling structure, schools interested in adopting the model must be creative in carving out appropriate time for students to engage in CAPS programming. There are two common scheduling structures CAPS affiliates use:



### SCHEDULE & USE OF TIME

- Half day: Many CAPS affiliates, as well as the flagship BVCAPS, have a half-day program, with students in core academic classes at their regular high school for half the day and in CAPS programming for half the day (e.g., 3 out of 7 periods). It is important that CAPS programming occurs in consecutive periods so that the time can be combined to create one long CAPS block. This extended time allows instructors to bring in guests, students to go offsite, or teams to deeply engage in project work.
- Alternating half days: Some CAPS affiliates are not able to dedicate half a day every day due to state requirements. Another common scheduling solution is to have CAPS programming every other day.

These, of course, are not the only scheduling structures that can be used in the CAPS model. The key is not about the total amount of time but being creative to have sufficient time for CAPS—to go out to see industry partners, to bring professionals in, and to do project work, as well as core academics.

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## Cultivating and managing community partnerships is critical to creating real-world, professional learning experiences for students.

CAPS affiliates establish and nurture relationships with partners that are mutually beneficial, sustainable, coordinated, and multifaceted. Through community partnerships:



### FAMILY & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- Students have the opportunity to be immersed in real industry environments.
- Curriculum reflects the current and projected realities of industry trends and needs, better preparing students for college and careers.
- Local organizations are able to invest in talent early.
- Skills level gaps can be identified and closed.
- Curriculum can be revised and adjusted according to changes in industry trends.
- Students are connected to industry partners and potential job opportunities and networks post-graduation.

**Industry:** Partnerships with local industries take learning beyond the classroom, enabling students to learn from educators who are not instructors. This also benefits industries by allowing them to be more

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involved in growing their future workforce and connecting with the community. [▶ CAPS Network: Community](#)

**Colleges and Universities:** Postsecondary partners can be resources for the design of the CAPS curriculum and can offer students dual or concurrent credit upon completion of CAPS courses. Colleges and universities recognize that CAPS graduates demonstrate the knowledge and skills to succeed in postsecondary settings and advance in career pathways.

Finding the right partners is key. CAPS recommends designating someone to build and manage community partnerships. The business development specialist discussed in the Adult Role section above can support this.

 [CAPS Playbook Module 1: Building & Growing Community Partnerships](#)

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### **The physical space should reflect a professional environment.**



#### **SPACE & FACILITIES**

Physical space can have an impact on culture. While there are no rigid requirements for space and facilities, it is important that it feels like a professional environment, not another high school classroom. Some CAPS affiliates have their own facility or borrow space in an industry workplace. Others must use space within the school but creatively make the space feel different by changing furniture, consistently bringing in professionals, and stripping away artifacts of a traditional high school classroom such as bells and intercoms.



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### **The CAPS model is designed to prepare students for the real world and technology integration and digital literacy is integral.**



#### **TECHNOLOGY & INFRASTRUCTURE**

The CAPS model mimics the real world as much as possible, and integrating technology is no exception. Technology is used extensively in the real world to conduct research, organize and track data, communicate ideas, and share work. Teaching content for memorization is replaced with teaching students how and where to find credible sources of information. What makes the integration of technology successful is how it enhances the students' learning experience.

Technology-based project management tools help ensure projects are implemented effectively and efficiently. The tool does not need to be a sophisticated platform, although there are great online software programs. A simple Excel spreadsheet can show the task, the team member responsible for the task, the deadline, and progress. Many CAPS affiliates leverage project management software programs to organize communication, discuss ideas, upload documents, and more.  [Basecamp](#)  
 [ProjectPlace](#)

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**The model requires creative allocation of funds for additional adult capacity as well as equipment and supplies for profession-based learning.**



### **BUDGET & OPERATIONS**

While there are no budgeting requirements of the model, CAPS recommends that schools allocate funding for the additional adult capacity needed to design, launch, and run programming. This includes someone to lead the model (e.g., director) as well as a business development specialist or community liaison to cultivate industry partners.

In addition, certain CAPS Strands may require additional funding for equipment and supplies. Some Strands, such as engineering, may require significant upfront investment for resources such as a makerspace, while other Strands, such as innovation, don't require equipment. CAPS affiliates are creative and strategic in leveraging existing resources, for example by using the makerspace at a local college or industry partner.

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**As an innovative solution that meets the economic development needs of the community, CAPS programming must be responsive to changing demands.**



### **CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

CAPS supports high-skill, high-demand careers through ongoing innovation in curriculum development, programs, and services based on local business and community needs. To truly serve the economic development needs of the community, each CAPS model must be built to reflect the skills and careers needed by industries in their local community. As the demands of local industries change, so must CAPS programming. To ensure programming is aligned with changing trends in industry, CAPS recommends an active advisory board from the program that meets regularly, as well as professional development time for instructors to connect with industry partners from their discipline. In addition, instructors are encouraged to continuously infuse their learning spaces with professionals so there is organic "watercooler time" to learn of the latest and greatest.

## **| IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Supports Offered**

[CAPS Network](#) offers the following supports to help you implement their approach.

## CAPS Affiliation

*Cost Associated*



The CAPS Network is a gathering of like-minded institutions across the world focused on the use of profession-based learning to prepare their students for both career and postsecondary next steps. CAPS affiliates collaborate on new innovations and share best practices through events and conversations. CAPS supports all affiliates with the implementation and improvement of the model through regular Zoom chats as well as on-site visits. CAPS affiliates also get access to CO-LAB, a web-based application that serves as a platform to enable connection and enhance relationship-building between members of CAPS Network.

[Learn More](#)

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## CAPS Resources

*Free*



CAPS offers free resources such as playbook modules, microcredentials, and a podcast to learn more about profession-based learning.

[Access Now](#)

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## Custom PD and Consulting

*Cost Associated*



CAPS also provides custom professional development, coaching, and consulting to support thinking around experiential and profession-based learning as requested.

[Express Interest](#)

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## Reach

14,000

Students

170

Districts

23

States

4

Countries



A video overview of the CAPS model from Blue Valley School district leaders, instructors, students, and partners.

A trailer for the documentary "Where Students Lead," which chronicles the student impact of the CAPS profession-based education model.

An animated storyboard video that explains the CAPS model.

[CAPS Professional Skills and Competencies](#)



An overview of the professional skills and competencies that the CAPS model drives toward.

[Characteristics and Elements of Pro-BL](#)

**Characteristics & Elements of Profession-Based Learning**

	Problem-Based	Project-Based	Profession-Based
<b>Time Frame</b>	Short, within one to two class periods	Longer, will require several class periods over several weeks	Longer, will require working in and out of class over several weeks
<b>Relationship</b>	Student & teacher	Student & teacher	Student & client
<b>Number of Participants</b>	Individual effort, typically not a team activity	Individual or team effort, can be organized either way	Team effort, groups of three students is optimal
<b>Curriculum Type</b>	"Off the shelf," not always customized	"Off the shelf" or customized, can be organized either way	Organized by the client

A table that shows the difference between problem-based, project-based, and profession-based learning.

[CAPS Network: Impact of Experimentation](#)



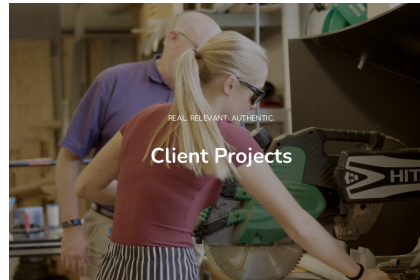
Hear from CAPS instructors and students on the impact of the model.

[CAPS Playbook Module 2: Diving into Profession-Based Learning](#)



A deep dive on Pro-BL, including detailed information and action checklists to help bring the model to your school.

[CAPS Student Projects](#)



See real client-connected projects by CAPS students.

[CAPS Network: Community](#)



Learn about the mutually beneficial relationship between CAPS and partners from professionals, instructors, and students.

[CAPS Playbook Module 1: Building & Growing Community Partnerships](#)



[Basecamp](#)



[ProjectPlace](#)



A deep dive on community partnerships, including detailed information and action checklists to help build partnerships for your school.

A project management software leveraged by some CAPS affiliates.

A project management software leveraged by some CAPS affiliates.

[How the CAPS Network is Transforming Career Readiness](#)



An article about the CAPS model in Forbes which highlights the results of their professional skills student confidence survey.