

How California Teachers Can Advance Their Salary Through Graduate Credits

Read the Full Article Here:

<https://www.modelteaching.com/education-articles/teacher-wellness/california-teacher-salary-advancement-graduate-credit>

California has approximately 1,000 school districts, and most of them reward graduate credit accumulation through their salary schedules. Whether you teach in a large urban district like San Diego Unified, a charter network like Green Dot Public Schools, a high-cost-of-living district like West Contra Costa USD, or a smaller district like San Ysidro or Palmdale, the financial implications for your career are the same: graduate credits move you to a higher lane on your district's salary schedule, and because lane changes are permanent, that means you are adding thousands of dollars to your annual paycheck for the rest of your career.

This article explains how a lane-and-step system works in districts across California, evaluates a range of California districts so you can see how the structure plays out in practice, and finally outlines how to plan your graduate credit accumulation strategically and in the most cost-effective way.

How salary advancement works in California

California has no statewide salary schedule. Districts will negotiate their own salary structure with their local teachers' union (typically affiliated with CTA-NEA or CFT-AFT). In other systems, like charter school networks, they negotiate their own salary structure separately. The framework, like salary advancement in most other states and districts, is a grid with steps (years of experience) running down each row and then lanes or classes (education and credential level) running across each column. Steps advance automatically each year, based on how long you have been in your profession. Lanes only move when you take action, like by earning graduate-level credits (the same as units) and submitting documentation to your district HR office.

Some Example California Districts

Take a look at only a few California districts so that you can better understand how additional credit accumulation can improve your salary across a range of different school environments.

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD)

San Diego Unified is one of the largest districts in California, with thousands of teachers serving over 95,000 students. SDUSD uses a 5-lane structure for salary advancement. These lane changes are based on the number of units, or credits, you can achieve after your bachelor's degree. The first lane change after your bachelor's degree is to accumulate an additional 36 units. After that, you can move up again if you have 60 units accumulated after you received a bachelor's degree, or if you have earned a master's degree. The next lane allows for salary advancement if you have accumulated 72 units after a bachelor's degree, or if you have a master's degree plus an additional 66 units. Finally, the highest lane currently requires either a bachelor's degree plus 90 additional units, or a master's degree with an additional 84 units.

Compare now a first-year SDUSD teacher with a bachelor's degree starting at the first step and first lane, earning \$59,490.98 per year, with a first-year SDUSD teacher who starts off at the highest lane, earning \$ 74,013.93. That's over \$14,000 a year increase in salary! That difference stays about the same for the first half of someone's teaching career, meaning that as soon as you earn those extra credits and an advanced degree, the better. That lane change could earn you hundreds of thousands of dollars in accumulated wealth over the course of your teaching career!

<https://www.sandiegounified.org/common/pages/GetFile.ashx?key=2JJYDX9g>

Fresno Unified School District (FUSD)

Let's take a look at FUSD next, which is also a large district in California with about 3,500 teachers. Lane changes move for the following credentials: a bachelor's plus at least 30 units is the first level; next is a bachelor's plus at least 45 units; then a bachelor's degree plus at least 60 units; then a bachelor's degree plus at least 75 units, and then the final lane change occurs after 90 units have been accumulated in addition to 9 units earned through FUSD's professional development office. In addition, FUSD provides additional yearly stipends for earning a master's degree or a doctoral degree. You can also earn a stipend if you become nationally board-certified, if you are a special education teacher, or if you are bilingual. So, there are many opportunities and ways to increase your salary in

FUSD! The difference in salary can be as large as \$45,000 per year when comparing a veteran teacher at the top salary level versus a new teacher. Even comparing those with the same years of experience means a difference of up to around \$13,000 in a given year.

<https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1755625869/fresnouorg/pr9b39bwk9ydt2mgf1yi/2025-2026TeacherSalarySchedules.pdf>

Lake Elsinore Unified School District (LEUSD)

Next, consider Lake Elsinore Unified, a smaller district comprised of 25 schools. In this school district, lane changes increase based on additional accumulation of 30, 45, or 60, or 75 units plus a bachelor's degree, or, once you earn a master's degree, you can continue to increase your salary by earning an additional 15 or 30 units past the master's. When comparing a new teacher at the bachelor's degree level versus a veteran teacher at the highest lane change, 15 units in each lane, the difference is a staggering \$79,000. Like all lane changes, the sooner you earn your units to move up in your salary scale, the more money you will accumulate long term for the remainder of your teaching career.

<https://4.files.edl.io/12f0/09/30/25/233701-fd8f6714-adf0-473c-a194-850864823c31.pdf>

San Ysidro School District

San Ysidro School District is a small elementary district in San Diego County, located near the U.S.-Mexico border. While San Ysidro's salary schedule is smaller than those of SDUSD or LEUSD, it follows the same general framework for salary advancement. Each lane change occurs after an additional 15 units are accumulated. After step 12, or the 12th year, you will not get any additional step/ experience increases without a master's degree. But earning a master's degree allows you to continue on and increase your salary by years of experience, plus it allows you to accumulate additional units after your master's degree to earn an additional change as well. The difference in salary, like all other districts, is quite large when you account for experience and credentials! At the highest level of experience, step 22, the difference between someone with only a bachelor's degree versus someone with a master's degree plus 60 units is nearly \$40,000 dollars a year! Earning your master's degree, accumulating additional units via graduate-level credits, and working at a school district for many years can earn you an incredible increase in yearly salary.

https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1768516757/sysdschoolsorg/qg9pfedc24qsk4z2yyxq/Teacher_010126.pdf

Green Dot Public Schools (Charter)

Let's finally take a look at a charter school instead of a school within a school district. Green Dot Public Schools is one of the largest charter school networks in California, operating schools primarily in the Los Angeles area and serving over 13,000 students. As a charter network, Green Dot negotiates its own teacher compensation structure separately from local public school districts, but it still offers lane changes and salary increases based on earned credentials. Column I, the first lane, requires a bachelor's degree. Column II requires an additional 15 units. Column III requests a valid subject area teaching credential. Column IV requires 45 units after a bachelor's degree and the teaching credential, OR a master's degree with the teaching credential. About mid-career, the difference between the lowest and the top lane for salary advancement is \$40,000 a year. Consider how much wealth you could accumulate if that difference were invested each year! Like all examples, the sooner you invest in your education and credentials, the more you can make for the rest of your teaching career. <https://greendot.org/teach-at-green-dot/>

How Model Teaching helps California teachers increase their salary through lane changes

Model Teaching offers graduate-level credit courses through our regionally accredited university partners. You have five partners to choose from: **Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU)**, **University of Massachusetts Global**, **University of the Pacific**, **Augustana University**, and **Valley City State University (VCSU)**. [LINK: <https://www.modelteaching.com/university-partners>] Courses from any of our partners provide you with an official transcript and a letter grade, and are used specifically for salary advancement increases.

For California teachers planning a lane change:

- **Do you need 15 credits to move into a new lane?** Our **15-credit Build Your Own Credit Bundle** [<https://mycourses.modelteaching.com/product/build-your-own-graduate-level-course-bundle-15-credits>] triggers one lane change at most California districts, in a format that can save you hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars. Your 15-credit investment can pay for itself with your lane change this year.

- **Do you need a specific number of credits to move into your next lane change?** <https://www.modelteaching.com/professional-development/build-your-own-graduate-level-credit-course-bundle#bundle-price-table> We provide every bundle option from 1 credit to 45 credits so that you can choose the exact number of credits you need for your next language change. Whether it is 27 credits, 7 credits, 41 or 4, you can choose the exact bundle that you need.
- **Have you considered a master's degree for your lane change?** If you are already taking credits so that you can accumulate units towards your lane change, you can consider a path towards a master's degree in your future, too. Model Teaching's partnership with Augustana University allows you to convert 9 credits of courses that you used for your salary advancement towards your master's degree. You can learn more about our partnership with Augustana University here: <https://www.modelteaching.com/masters>

Model Teaching uses a pay-as-you go model for your credits that works a bit differently from other providers. You pay a small registration fee now to access your course and complete it. Then, once you are finished, you can pay for your credit processing in order to register yourself with your chosen university. This model allows you to pay as you complete each course so that you are not burdened with a large up-front fee to complete your courses. This model means you don't have to worry about payment plans or monthly contracts for payment, and you don't have to worry about your transcript being held until the end of a 12 month payment cycle. Also, you can submit your transcript to your district typically within weeks of completing your course, ensuring you meet your lane change deadline.

[Explore Model Teaching's Graduate Credit Bundles →](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a teacher lane change in California?

A California lane change allows teachers to earn education and units (or credits) for a permanent increase in their salary. Unlike step increases, which are an automatic pay raise based on years of service in the district, lane changes can only happen when you earn a master's degree or higher, and when you earn graduate-level credits past your bachelor's degree that are applicable toward your teaching career. You can learn more about salary

advancement options here to help you in your lane change:

<https://www.modelteaching.com/teacher-salary-advancement-courses>

Will my California district accept Model Teaching credits for a lane change? Most California districts accept graduate credits from any regionally accredited university, and Model Teaching's university partners are all regionally accredited. We've helped many California teachers complete lane changes successfully. However, always check your specific district approval process first!

How many credits do I need for a lane change? This depends on your district. Your district's salary schedule will explain the exact amount of credits, or units, you need after a bachelor's degree or after a master's degree in order for you to advance to the next salary level. schedule.

When should I submit my transcript to my district? Most California districts will accept credits twice per year in the fall and in the spring. Typically, many districts set a deadline of February 1st for the spring and September 1st for the fall in order to have those credits applied to your lane change for the year. However, each district can have its own deadline, so it is always best to check your specific district. You can process your credits through Model Teaching as you complete each course, then submit your transcripts once you are ready. If you are on a tight deadline to complete your credits, Model Teaching can help guide you on when to complete your courses and assist you in quickly requesting your transcript to best meet your deadline.

Can I work toward a master's degree through Model Teaching? Yes. Up to 9 Model Teaching credits that you may be planning for your California lane change for salary advancement can also be applied toward Augustana University's Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree as part of Augustana's learner-designed concentration. You can find more here: <https://www.modelteaching.com/masters>