

Regional Cross-System Education Partnerships and the Need for Supportive State Policies

Regional education partnerships are developing across the country to meet a wide range of student needs. California is home to a diverse array of such regional partnerships; the state has provided \$500 million through the Career Pathways Trust (kindergarten through grade 14 pathways program) initiative alone, with millions more in support of Regional Occupational Centers and Programs, the Linked Learning Pilot Program, Workforce Investment Board (WIB) activities, and other regional education- and training-related investments. California can potentially leverage those investments and support local innovation and collaboration by creating a more supportive policy environment for regional work at the state and system levels.

Regional Partnerships Study

In March 2015, EdInsights (formerly the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy, or IHELP) released a report, [Organizing for Success](#), documenting lessons learned from regional partnerships across California. The report's findings were based on 37 interviews with people from 19 regional partnerships across the state. While that report is aimed primarily at practitioners, partnership stakeholders, and foundations that support cross-sector collaboration, this brief is intended for policymakers at the state and system levels.

The state's large size, its regional economic diversity, and its decentralized governance structure for education have contributed to a demand for regional education collaborations. In many cases, these regional partnerships are providing the kind of planning, goal-setting, and coordination that state governments provide in other states. Regional collaborations may ultimately prove to be an effective approach to improving educational attainment across California.

A concern raised by interviewees throughout the study, though, is the lack of an overall state vision both for regional collaboration and for how

California's K-12 through postsecondary systems should connect with and support each other (see "Regional Partnerships Study" sidebar for more information on the research). While interviewees generally believed that state policymakers and system leaders support regional cross-systems efforts to improve education and workforce development, there is not a coherent set of policies or goals at those higher levels to encourage and sustain such work. Moreover, interviewees voiced frustration that the state lacks certain foundational components, such as cross-system data structures and the ability to forecast regional education and workforce needs, requiring regional partnerships to bear the cost and burden of "reinventing the wheel" in each local context.

Regional partnership stakeholders enjoy their current flexibility and autonomy and do not want the state to become overly involved or to develop a compliance-based model that could inhibit creativity and effectiveness. However, partnerships would benefit from a more coherent and supportive policy environment. This brief outlines findings from the exploratory study about regional partnerships and outlines some initial steps the state could take to address common concerns raised by the participants we interviewed.

Findings

Multiple funding streams and disconnected policies and initiatives are confusing. Regional partnerships receive funding through federal, state, and philanthropic investments, and the different reporting requirements can be overwhelming. In addition to the initiatives listed at the beginning of the brief, examples include: the state’s Career Technical Education Pathways Initiatives, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program, and the Lumina Foundation’s Community Partnerships for Attainment initiative. A perception is that state lawmakers and funders do not fully consider the difficulty of working with the various goals, requirements and timelines related to multiple funding streams. One community college vice president said, “The state does not have a vision of how all of these pieces fit together so we are always having to make sense locally. It would help if the state could see the interconnections... but give us flexibility to do the work locally.”

Types of Regional Partnerships

Most regional partnerships in this study focus on improving high school graduation rates and preparing students for success in college and career—especially for underserved student populations. Specific strategies vary and include:

- Aligning curricular expectations across high school and college;
- Reducing the need for remedial college coursework;
- Collaborating with business partners to develop curricular pathways and degree or certificate programs that prepare students for careers that meet regional workforce needs; and/or
- Improving student support services across education systems to increase high school and college retention and graduation rates.

Existing funding sources likely cannot sustain long-term partnerships.

Regional partnership stakeholders want to institutionalize their work, but often the amount of time provided by particular funding streams is not long enough to be sustaining. For example, partnerships funded through the Career Pathways Trust noted that the three-year timeframe of the grants is not long enough to build the infrastructure needed for complex, rigorous, sustainable pathway programs. They report that three years is barely enough time to build trusting working relationships in the places where those did not exist prior to the grant, and is not enough time to create a new partnership; develop and implement goals, objectives, and strategies; and see measurable changes in student attainment.

State and system fiscal incentives are weak or even counterproductive. Traditional state education funding mechanisms do not support regional partnerships or cross-sector work. In fact, many interviewees said the way they are funded can discourage collaboration. For example, if several community colleges collaborate to increase college enrollment in a particular area of study, but one college’s enrollment in that area decreases as a result, that college’s funding would decline. This leads to a disincentive to engage in collaborative work. One indication of these weak fiscal incentives is that system- and campus-level budget decisions often do not prioritize partnership work that spans into other segments—such as paying for faculty time to develop new curricular pathways that span education systems.

Business partners need to be more engaged in regional work. Interviewees often reported that it is challenging to find workforce representation for the formal governance structures of existing consortia. Some interviewees also expressed concern about the availability of work-based learning opportunities, at

a large scale, in K-12 and in postsecondary, and limited opportunities for educators to learn about current workforce needs.

A lack of structural supports from the state impedes regional effectiveness. Interviewees emphasized two structural supports they need to be effective:

Data accessibility and use. Interviewees are frustrated by the lack of accessible cross-system data. For example, K-12 districts would like more consistent information about how their graduates fare in higher education, while community colleges would benefit from more systematic information about entering high school students to help place students in the right courses and to address remedial needs more effectively. One-to-one data sharing arrangements are technically difficult, time-consuming, and costly for local education entities to develop. As one consortium administrator stated, “It’s difficult to get a regional snapshot on data to see what’s happening. A lot of dollars are going into this and we can’t tell the return on investment without being able to link data. If only one segment gets to see how it fits, how can a region set aspirational goals?”

Forecasting, analysis, and regional goal setting. Many, though not all, regional partnerships do not have the capacity for sophisticated demographic and economic forecasting. Such forecasting, along with access to cross-sector data, could help the partnerships develop and monitor goals, objectives, and strategies more effectively.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

As first steps, state policymakers could do the following:

Learn from existing regional efforts. There are likely specific policy, regulatory, and legal barriers that impede the work of regional partnerships, but it is difficult for regional leaders to identify both the barriers and the appropriate entity to approach about a concern. In the short term, lawmakers can direct staff to reach out to partnerships—in public hearings, staff workshops, or even informal meetings—and learn about which aspects of state policy are not working for them. In the longer term, policymakers can work with regional leaders to develop policy and funding approaches that foster and reward cross-sector collaboration.

Review goals, objectives, metrics, and reporting requirements across different state funding programs and grants. Working alongside local-level program administrators, legislative staff and agency staff could jointly find ways to consolidate requirements or streamline reporting.

Convene a state-level team to develop a plan for providing education institutions with cross-sector data and data-sharing arrangements. The Legislature or Governor could convene this team and charge it with finding solutions that both safeguard student privacy and are feasible in the current fiscal environment.

Identify an entity with the capacity to forecast educational and workforce needs. Various state agencies employ analysts, demographers, and researchers, and the state’s public universities have analytical capacities. The state could invest in an existing entity to fulfill the analytical needs identified by regional educational partnerships.

Develop sources of technical assistance. The state could create a repository of resources, such as commonly used goals (or methods for determining goals), objectives, indicators, and metrics; tips for using data effectively; and information about different collaborative frameworks. Additionally, the state could provide modest funding to support forums that help educators learn from each other across systems and across regions.

Use the state's convening power to engage business partners. In addition to raising the need more publicly for business engagement the state could, over the longer term, develop stronger incentives for business to become actively involved in regional education partnerships, career pathway development, and work experiences for students.

Analyze and address capacity within California's public education systems. The budget cuts during the Great Recession have damaged infrastructures across systems—a capacity problem that can hinder the success of regional efforts. Minimally, the state needs to analyze the collective capacity and success of the entire public higher education system, not just require annual reports from each segment individually. Such analyses will help identify critical gaps, bottlenecks, and capacity problems systematically. Over the longer term, analyses needs to inform action, such as: establishing spending priorities, making strategic new investments, and providing adequate funding for the state's education needs.

The recommendations outlined in this report demonstrate how the state can provide a more supportive policy environment for a host of state investments and support student success across California.

Who We Are



Education Insights Center

Advancing Research and Policy
for K-12 and Postsecondary Education

EdInsights (formerly the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy or IHELP) was established in 2001. Its mission is to help improve postsecondary and career readiness and success for traditionally underserved students. We work within and across K-12

and higher education systems. Our research, evaluation, technical assistance, policy analysis, and other services support and inform policymakers, practitioners, and educators.

Please contact us for:

- More detailed information on the issues discussed in this report.
- Assistance in connecting with regional partnership leaders and stakeholders.
- Help in developing specific state and system-level policy solutions to enable effective regional partnerships.

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