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Considerations for Building Successful Regional Partnerships

A Roadmap for Consortium Development

Overview

Regional alignment of education and workforce development has the potential to serve as a catalyst for new policies, programs, and partnerships that transform student preparation for postsecondary education and careers, advancing California's workforce and economic development goals. For this reason, a number of state initiatives have placed increasing emphasis on the role of regional planning and coordination.

A review of project proposals from the first cycle of Career Pathways Trust grants provides an informative cross-section of regional work occurring throughout California, at various scales and stages of development. The Linked Learning Alliance has reviewed a range of these applications, including both funded and non-funded applications at all three funding levels. This analysis provided an initial review of opportunities for supporting the field in implementation and planning, and identified a number of risks that can be mitigated if approached from an asset model orientation.

The results of this analysis are provided in the following pages in the format of a planning guide. The suggestions and considerations we share are premised upon several core beliefs:

- **Responsive planning is student- and trainee-centered planning.** While the goal may be to transform education and workforce development, and thus improve social and economic outcomes, this goal can only be achieved through an understanding of those to be served. Any policies, programs, services, or other activities should be developed with the benefit for students and trainees at the center.
- **Effective partnerships are built upon shared accountability and investment.** This presupposes a collective vision that facilitates mutual benefit.
- **Equity is foundational to transformational impact.** Achieving equity is about more than demographic representation. It requires that critical reflection and an asset-based mindset are applied to policies and practices for program planning, outreach, recruitment, access, and support services.

Based on this analysis, we offer our observations in service to regional planning efforts across the state. Also, while regional consortia are the unit of discussion in the following pages, most of the guidance provided is also applicable to planning occurring at a more localized level.

1. Stakeholder Engagement

If the goal of forming a regional partnership is to better align education and workforce systems for mutual benefit, it is important to identify a range of voices and stakeholders to engage. Where there is a challenge to engage certain critical partners, consider opportunities for peer-to-peer outreach and facilitated site visits that provide a cognitive 'entry path' through messaging and framing that 'speak their language' and articulate a return on investment aligned with their own internal goals. Students and families are critical as the end recipients of services. In addition, institutional/organizational leaders and practitioners must both be part of discussion – the former being necessary for systemic impact, the latter for effective implementation.

2. Committing to Co-creation

It is critical to frame initial dialogues as an opportunity to develop a collective vision and unified strategy. To avoid competing visions, dialogues should be facilitated, and structured around the collective identification of needs and creation of a regional strategy. For example, if the discussion is too focused on how colleges, employers and community organizations can help their local high schools, it becomes easy to forget that there are opportunities to support the programs and services of partner entities through the collaborative process.

While it is important to support the success of high school students in transitions to college and career, it is equally important to many stakeholders to support those who are already out of school, including: college and adult education students, apprentices, and the underemployed, among others. Although each group has unique challenges or barriers to success, many of the same stakeholders are critical to address these issues. As such, co-creation can allow for the manifestation of a common strategy to address diverse needs and target groups. An ideal outcome of a partnership would be the development of programs, services and supports that are reflective of the multiple entry and exit points along the journey of education and career preparation.

Threats to Partnership Formation

- **Intending to get others to 'sign off' on a predetermined vision or action plan.**
- **Assuming needs and strategy are readily apparent.**
- **Assuming any one project or intervention is *the* solution.**
- **Focusing on one stakeholder as the recipient of others' support.**
- **Inability to understand and speak to other perspectives.**
- **Leaving out critical stakeholders who may provide valuable perspective and resources.**
- **Unwillingness to defer leadership to a third-party or non-controversial partner.**

3. Understanding Who You Serve

While the end goal may be a more efficient, coordinated education and workforce ecosystem, such a system must develop around those it is intended to serve – students and job trainees. Determining the appropriate programs, policy changes, and support services requires a deep understanding of the varied populations to be served. This goes beyond standard quantitative data, and must include qualitative data – such as surveys of students, parents, teachers, employers, and local support service providers - to understand the issues they perceive as the greatest challenges to successful transitions between various

Keeping Students at the Center

- All partners should be able to articulate who the students they serve are.
- Students are more than their ethnicity, abilities, and family income.
- While these do not *define* who they are, they do *inform* who they are, and should inform programs, policies, and services as relevant.
- Academic, technical and workplace skill needs should be as specific and actionable as possible.

levels of education and career preparation. By understanding who will be served – including any specific academic, social, linguistic, transportation, health or other barriers that significantly affect their educational and employment outcomes – partners can move onwards to define which interventions are critical and what activities are needed to support those ends. This also includes understanding specific barriers to accessing information, enrolling in education and training programs, and persisting in those programs.

While identification of challenges and barriers is necessary, partners must equally understand the unique assets that different populations of students or trainees have. English learners, individuals with disabilities, and those with other academic or personal barriers to education and employment each have different needs and challenges, but also bring unique strengths that can inform programs and specialized curriculum and activities. Equity should be considered non-negotiable, and should not be neglected due to a perception that some students are less capable or assumption that they will not succeed. For instance, while English language proficiency may be a barrier to success in some ways, it can be used to the advantage of students if education and training programs are adapted to work with these strengths and prepare them for career mobility in fields where bilingualism is valued. The development of contextualized courses that blend English language education with career and technical education is another area of opportunity.

4. Goals and Objectives

Based upon the needs identified through stakeholder engagement and review of student needs across various stages of education and training, short- and long-term goals should begin to take shape. While these may be revisited and revised over time, as specific activities are planned, partners should begin to articulate objectives and set benchmarks for the general outcomes in mind – such as increased graduation rates, industry certifications, internship rates – that can inform the development of a strategy and the specific programs and activities to be supported in pursuit of that strategy.

Opportunities to Leverage Education and Workforce Initiatives

California Community Colleges
- Bachelor Degree Pilot Program
- Doing What Matters for Jobs and the Economy
- Student Success and Support Program

California Department of Education
- Local Control and Accountability Plans

California Workforce Investment Board
- Workforce Investment Act Five-Year Local Plans

Multi-Agency
- Adult Education consortia
- Apprenticeship Programs
- Associate Degrees for Transfer
- California State Plan for CTE (Perkins Act)
- Career Pathways Trust consortia
- Linked Learning Pathways to the Baccalaureate
- SB 1070 Career Technical Pathways Program

5. Mapping: Assets, Needs, and Alignment

With an initial idea of priorities and objectives, an assessment of existing programs, services and other resources among partners can ensure efficiency and alignment moving forward. Look at where partners already have capacity to expand activities, adjust policies, or share access to expertise and resources. There is no need to fund the development of a new program if it is duplicative, or additional professional development if existing opportunities can be improved upon. Research promising practices outside of your region, and look for models that can be replicated or adapted, rather than reinventing the wheel. Look at the priority and emergent sectors for industry growth in your region, and the existing apprenticeship and career pathway programs at high schools, colleges and elsewhere. Are any particular high-need, high-wage programs missing? Is there misalignment between programs?

Look at the many statewide initiatives that partners participate in, as well as institutional and organizational strategic plans, to identify common priorities and see where there are gaps that can be solved through adaptation or specialization, and which require new interventions. This is especially useful if seeking funds, as it shows thoughtfulness about making the best use of existing resources and coordinating across entities. Be able to articulate what is already in progress, and what needs to occur.

6. Charting the Path: Programs, Policies, Services, and Other Activities

Asset mapping and need identification lead naturally to the development of work plans and timelines. The specific things that are being planned will necessarily differ based upon regional resources and needs, but should include detailed plans, timelines, and benchmarks for:

- **Education and training program development** – whether the creation of new programs or redesign of existing ones, including apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship, and other work-based learning sequences that are developmentally appropriate and aligned with programs of study
- **Support service alignment and development** – such as college and career counseling, skills assessments, and internship and job-ready 'boot camps'
- **Parent outreach and recruitment, and ongoing engagement** – in recognition of the role of families in reinforcing student self-perception of abilities and opportunities.
- **Transition supports** – such as middle school career exploration, summer bridge programs, peer and professional mentorships, financial aid and financial literacy training
- **Supports for non-traditional populations** – such as adapted curriculum and training for English language learners and individuals with disabilities, or services for foster youth and youth offenders.
- **Employer engagement and recruitment**
- **Professional development** – as relevant to support other efforts as mentioned above
- **Regional and/or sector Intermediary development** – as relevant to project scope

Threats to Success

- **Lack of buy-in from staff/faculty.**
- **No strategy to coordinate services across agencies.**
- **No checks in place to assure quality and consistency.**
- **Poor understanding of how equity can be addressed in outreach, recruitment, or support services.**
- **Lack of ambitions or impact in setting goals and benchmarks.**
- **Focus on process at expense of outcomes.**
- **Lack of meaningful, reasonable outcomes and milestones.**
- **Poor articulation of strategy or action plan, with only a general idea or suggestion of activities.**
- **Lack of distributed accountability.**
- **Lack of shared investment, whether in-kind or financial.**

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- **Policy development** – such as for dual enrollment expansion, program articulation, pre-apprenticeship articulation, or enrollment and course placement.

It is important at this point to ensure that the actual providers of any potential services and programs have been, and continue to be, active participants in discussions. The success of any efforts will be compromised if staff, faculty, or other critical partners are not willing participants. As such, it is important to identify potential sites and programs based both on capacity and interest. There should be clear buy-in from staff and support from leadership to carry out and contribute to project success.

7. Distributive Leadership and Shared Investment

While successful implementation is dependent on good planning and individual and organizational investment to carry out a work plan, it is important that clear roles, responsibilities and accountability are in place, and applicable to all partners, as relevant to the work they propose to undertake. As such, governance and decision-making processes should be well-defined. If necessary, an intermediary organization, a non-controversial agency (as determined by partners), or a joint powers agreement can be formed to convene stakeholders on equal footing and take the lead on partnership management. An organizational chart is useful to communicate process and responsibilities. Programs and services should not all be the responsibility of a handful of partners – secondary and postsecondary partners, as well as community organizations, local government agencies, and employers all have assets and resources that can contribute to a continuum of support that is mutually reinforcing. This not only applies to program planning and content expertise, but also services such as counseling and mentorship.

Shared investment and shared return are as important as shared leadership. Clear financial and in-kind contributions from partners suggest their level of commitment. Just as costs should be borne by each partner as reasonable for their circumstances, so too much the benefit of investments be shared as reasonable for common benefit – a consortium should not be used as a means to 'divide the spoils' of superficial collaboration.

8. Strategy and Sustainability

With goals defined, activities determined, and decision-making processes articulated, implementation of a sustainable and impactful partnership is best served by strategic thinking about funding, and building from an initial scope which is realistic but ambitious. If the goal truly is to strengthen regional integration, and the right partners are on board, some progress should be feasible whether or not outside funding is obtained. External funding should be a means to accelerate partnership impact, not a condition for its creation. The circumstances of partnership formation are reflective of its intentions and commitment.

Strategic investments are systemic investments – such as technical assistance, capacity building, policy development and other long-term investments. Rather than rely on one source of funding for a project or program, braiding funds from multiple sources can ensure the continuous of work – albeit at a

Sustainability Risks

- **Breadth over depth**
- **Reliance on a single source of funds.**
- **Focus on short-term investments.**
- **Focus on new staff at expense of capacity building.**
- **Scaling before refining**

smaller scale – if one source of funding is lost. This is especially important where staffing is involved. While funding for technical assistance and capacity building can create long-term benefits, it is important to exercise caution when increasing staffing to support project implementation. If a single source of funding is all that is available to bring on new staff, there should be a plan in place for how the partnership will assume responsibility for the a long-term cost of those roles. Alternatively, there should be a plan for how the responsibilities of those roles can be transitioned to other staff if funding falls through. Finding ways to pool expertise, resources, and the time of existing staff should come before any decision to hire additional staff. Finally, shared activities or expenditures should be in clear service of specific needs or outcomes that have already been identified.

The limits of partner commitment, and current capacity, should be heeded when defining a project scope so that is both ambitious *and* realistic. Developing a solid template (for policies, programs, etc.) within a limit scope, a partnership can later expand the reach of its work. For instance, where pathways and regional collaboration is already under way, a focus on the scaling of regional support systems and work-based learning may be appropriate. Where this work is nascent, the focus should be towards infrastructure to support basic implementation.

This scoping should take into consideration which industry sectors are the most sensible to build from before expanding into others. Attempting to dive in to too many sectors – especially without a clear track record or strategy in place – will make it difficult to convince critical partners, as it shows a lack of focus and planning. It will also make it prohibitive to achieving profound change, as the focus will be on breadth over depth. As mentioned before, the focus should be on getting a system in place that can be expanded upon refinement. Asset mapping should have helped to identify those sectors which are high priorities for your region, and which have significant resources to build from and align. Focusing on those with the most potential for success will be more cost effective. It is much easier to scale and replicate a successful model that builds from promising starts than to create multiple models at the same time from projects at different stages of readiness.

Conclusion

Regions are uniquely poised to take leadership in advancing education and workforce outcomes through economies of scale. By working with families and employers, and overcoming the siloes of agencies, jurisdictions, and sectors, greater integration of expertise, opportunity, resources, and funding is achievable. It is critical for sustainable partnerships to be built on a commitment to shared investment and accountability. Collective efforts must be oriented towards serving those members of the community who are the ultimate recipients and beneficiaries of programs, services and policies to be developed. Some individuals may have academic and personal barriers, but all have the potential for success given proper opportunities and support.