

NOW AND THEN

Balancing quick wins with lasting progress when working across sectors to change systems

By Marty Alvarado and Joel Vargas



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Foreword

In 2015, The James Irvine Foundation engaged Jobs for the Future to design and manage a cross-sector initiative to scale and elevate the quality of Linked Learning, an increasingly popular approach to college and career readiness. Now in its third year of implementation, the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence (or “Regional Hubs”) bring together K-12 school districts, postsecondary institutions, workforce intermediaries, employers, and community-based organizations to implement a coordinated Linked Learning strategy. It is a systems change initiative supporting Irvine’s goal to increase the number of low-income youth in California who graduate from high school and achieve a postsecondary credential by age 25.

This brief shares what we are learning with Irvine as we pursue change across sectors. In particular, it focuses on how we are addressing the difficult need to simultaneously demonstrate short-term progress that encourages continued stakeholder involvement while also taking time to build the capacities and relationships that will truly shift a system in ways that endure.

In effect, we are caught between the “now” of expectations for quick wins and the “then” of the initiative’s ultimate ambitions. This document describes our journey in this space, along with our strategies and reflections to date.

In our work, we have studied and benefitted from the growing body of knowledge available to inform systems change initiatives. Likewise, we hope that this brief contributes to the efforts of others who are planning and conducting deep, broad-scale efforts to generate lasting, positive impact for society.

Finally, we want to acknowledge the important work and significant contributions of our developmental evaluation partners, Equal Measure and Harder+Company Community Research. Their expertise and collegiality are significant to our learning journey. We also encourage readers to view their thoughtful, actionable analysis on the subject of Cultivating Leadership in Cross-Sector Collaborations.

Marty Alvarado

Director, Learning Communities

Joel Vargas

Vice President, School and Learning Designs

Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence Sites



East Bay

Led by the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce

Tulare-Kings

Led by INNOVATE Tulare-Kings and Tulare-Kings Linked Learning Consortium

Long Beach

Led by the Long Beach College Promise (Long Beach Unified School District; Long Beach City College; California State University, Long Beach; and the City of Long Beach)

San Bernardino

Led by a consortium (San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools' Alliance for Education; California State University, San Bernardino; and the Inland Empire Economic Partnership)

An Inherent Tension in Building Cross-Sector Collaborations

Cross-sector strategies carry compelling appeal. New or deeper collaborations can bypass traditional boundaries and connect otherwise siloed actors who then achieve more together. When engaging players across sectors to affect systems, an inherent tension often emerges: Large-scale impact calls for deliberate progress over time, while participants expect to see early outcomes that justify their investment of resources. Success therefore requires achievement “now” as well as “then”:

Short-term outcomes are needed to help partners and potential partners recognize the value of their collaboration, and generate momentum for the work.

Long-term outcomes are needed to achieve the ultimate intent of these partnerships, typically in the form of enduring new networks, processes, and policies that transform the character of a system, improving how it performs and the quality and quantity of what it produces.

At best, initiative leaders can find it challenging to balance these potentially dueling requirements. At worst, the tension can cause cross-sector collaborations to fall short of their potential in one of two ways. The collaborative might respond to pressures to show success “now” by overemphasizing incremental quick wins. While these successes can gain participants’ favor they may last only as long as a grant period, especially when they are not the product of a commitment by group members to deploy resources differently to sustain improvements. Alternatively, lead players may focus too exclusively on the reflective, measured work of building the levers for systemic future change. When other participants feel they can not wait until “then” for achievement, or see these efforts as too detached from current needs and opportunities, their interest as well as investments can wane, and potential new partners may be demotivated from joining the collective effort.

The above dynamics resonate with the experience of participants in the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence. We have seen how the friction between near-term success and long-term progress can be especially pronounced when one or more of the following factors are in play:

- > Partnerships are emerging or young, and not fully operational
- > Participants are competing for what they view as scarce resources
- > New potential participants are coming to the table and seeking to understand and experience the benefits that their respective institutions will receive through participation
- > There is a history of conflict among potential collaborators
- > Participants have not yet fully bought into or seen a return on their investment in collaboration
- > There are preexisting, vibrant relationships that may not readily integrate new partners
- > There are substantial power dynamics affecting relationships and approaches between participants
- > Partners press for urgent decisions, actions, or impact based on the demands of their stakeholders or needs of their communities

It is hard to imagine an effort to create or strengthen cross-sector collaboration with few or none of these factors present. As initiative leaders, we therefore must recognize that partners and their associated stakeholders will expect and need to see changes relatively quickly, and that they may find it hard to appreciate, or trust solely in, the patient investment of their time and resources that is required to actually transform a system.

Related, we must understand how prior experience as grant recipients may influence the behaviors of partners today. Systems change efforts represent a relatively recent approach in the broad sweep of social investment, and can require a new mindset for public and nonprofit organizations that are used to receiving grant funds. For these players, a focus on more programmatic—rather than systemic—outputs has been reinforced through traditional grantmaking practices and funder interests. For example, in the U.S. educational arena, where the Regional Hubs initiative is located, countless grants have been aimed at achieving specific student outcomes (e.g., type of coursework completed, persistence, dual enrollment credits, test scores, etc.). These efforts are frequently well-founded and produce impact for the populations served during the funding period. We reference them here simply to make the point that organizations are often used to receiving grants that cause them to pursue relatively tangible outcomes in a relatively short period of time. This experience may, for some grantees, contribute to early disorientation as they accept funding and responsibility to pursue more complex systems change outcomes.

We delve more fully into our learning and efforts to address the tension between achievement “now” and “then” within this brief. Before we do, however, we want to briefly set context by summarizing Linked Learning and the initiative at hand.

About Linked Learning

The Regional Hubs initiative focuses on elevating the scale and quality of Linked Learning. This approach to high school reform, drawn from the strategies and success of career academies and other models, has been steadily demonstrated and evaluated throughout California over the past decade. The approach is especially attractive as a means to achieve outcomes with low-income students who are historically less likely to graduate high school and pursue a postsecondary credential. In recent years, the State of California has invested significant resources to expand aspects of the Linked Learning approach throughout the state, and today Linked Learning is being applied in a growing number of locations across the nation.

The Linked Learning approach integrates rigorous academics that meet college-ready standards with sequenced, high-quality career-technical education, work-based learning, and supports to help students stay on track. For participating students, education is organized around industry-sector themes. The industry theme is woven into lessons taught by teachers who collaborate across subject areas with input from working professionals, and reinforced by work-based learning with real employers.

Evaluation shows that Linked Learning students have higher rates of engagement and higher graduation rates than their peers at traditional high schools. You can learn more about this approach and its growth at LinkedLearning.org.

Linked Learning exposes high school students to previously unimagined college and career opportunities by turning their education into a personally relevant, engaging experience.

About Regional Hubs

The James Irvine Foundation served as a catalyst and major funder for the demonstration and evaluation of Linked Learning in California. This was a signature effort in support of Irvine's program goal to increase the number of low-income youth in California who graduate from high school and achieve a postsecondary credential by age 25.

Irvine tested Linked Learning through a multi-year initiative with nine school districts representing diverse geographies in California; each district had below average student achievement and contained a high population of low-income students. As this significant district-level effort drew to a conclusion, Irvine sought to support Linked Learning's evolution to the next level of scale and impact via cross-sector collaboration at the regional level. For Linked Learning to grow, more ownership for its strategies by regional postsecondary, workforce, and industry partners is needed given that the approach requires creating linkages for students between high schools and these systems. In 2015, Irvine launched the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence initiative. Jobs for the Future was

engaged to design and manage the initiative, serving as Irvine’s intermediary and leading technical assistance with grantees.

Four regions are participating in the initiative: East Bay, Tulare-Kings, Long Beach, and San Bernardino. In each of these “Regional Hubs,” multiple anchor organizations (our grantees) bring together school districts, postsecondary institutions, workforce development organizations, employers, and other public and nonprofit agencies. These networks seek to strengthen existing pathways, create new pathways, and deepen the connectivity of these pathways across institutions and industries.



The four regions were selected based on their commitment to Linked Learning, existing relationships among cross-sector partners, and history of collaboration. The initiative goal is to increase the number of and demand for Linked Learning graduates and pathways. Its approach is multi-faceted, and features three primary levers of change—strengthening leadership for Linked Learning in each region, developing broader and stronger partnerships in these regions, and building systems that help young people more seamlessly and successfully move through high school to college and into the workforce.

Barriers to Large-Scale Change

As Regional Hubs formed, we asked partners to identify the things they saw as barriers to scaling Linked Learning. We wanted to learn, and make known, the current realities that would complicate or potentially limit their work. Multiple topics emerged from this inquiry, with most regions reporting many or all of these items as considerations they needed to address. We synthesized, shared, and examined this set of factors with the grantee cohort:

Capacity. It is challenging to continuously convene and coordinate activities between the network of partners required to deliver high-quality career pathways.

Sustainability. Many partner districts conduct Linked Learning activities seeded by one-time grants from the State of California; ongoing financial sustainability of these efforts is in question.

Infrastructure. The lack of sufficient relationships and partnerships between education and industry restricts work-based learning, a key tenet of Linked Learning.

Silos. Many partners plan and deliver Linked Learning pathways with relatively little peer interaction.

Professional Development. Limited opportunities for Linked Learning professional development, training, and capacity-building for K-16 staff restrict the rate and quality of delivery.

Commitment. A number of partners, representing all primary sectors in the initiative, must be willing to make ongoing investment to ensure the availability of resources needed to scale and sustain adoption of Linked Learning.

Identifying and discussing these factors was productive for each group of cross-sector partners and for us as the initiative intermediary. Talking about these real, and relatable, challenges helped lay the groundwork for deeper conversations about what it takes to address larger systemic issues. This content also led to clarity and emphasis on three levers of change that increasingly define the initiative. We design and deliver technical assistance based on these levers, viewing them as the instruments for achieving gains that will outlast our grant funding:

Strengthening leadership – empowering more players to lead development of pathways, including players in education, business, and workforce development

Developing partnerships – demonstrating the value gained by districts, postsecondary institutions, and businesses that work together to create pathways

Building systems – developing processes for new collaborative action to create and sustain pathways, and helping partners grow their capacity to fully participate in these collaborations

With these levers as a guide, partners began planning how to execute this work, and determining both the indicators and means they would rely on to measure success.

The Heart of the Matter

At this point in the process, the tension between short- and long-term gains became palpable; we wondered if we could be successful “now” as well as “then.” While all partners expressed a desire to achieve the systemic change we collectively sought, conversation and suggested tactics would time and again return to expectations for quick progress. Partners would invariably and understandably focus on their respective current program goals. They saw opportunity, and in many cases felt pressure, to find ways for their participation in this systems change work to contribute to achievement of their priorities, and to do so in relatively immediate ways.

Navigating these conversations was often challenging for us and created difficult moments in our engagement with grantees. This was especially so as we were in many ways building the plane as

we were flying it—in reality, bringing Linked Learning more intentionally to a regional context was new work for all. As the intermediary, and through steady dialogue with our funder, we began the initiative with a focus on identifying and supporting promising sets of regional players more so than with a predetermined methodology for change that all would follow. We expected to learn and grow, together, as this initiative advanced.

At times, our learning led to a need for reflection that in turn informed new strategies and technical assistance interventions with grantees. These periods of analysis and planning, often accompanied by our expressed cautions that quick wins alone would not be sufficient for ultimate success, could be perceived as long and potentially unproductive pauses for partners who felt they were on the clock to deliver outcomes.

We have sought to maintain continued contact and communication with grantees throughout these periods, and worked to understand their motivations and challenges. Ultimately, we strove to help them simultaneously pursue—and connect—more immediate gains with more enduring progress in the initiative. We are now in process with this part of the journey, and can point to three emerging principles that have value to us and may be instructive to others.

Emerging Principles

1 Design to include meaningful, easily understood, early wins—connected to ultimate goals

Quick wins are valuable motivators in any initiative. Early successes help collaborators see and believe that real progress is possible, and encourage participants to continue making investments of time, staff, and other resources. However, when pursuing systems change, the earliest gains often relate to process rather than impact or outputs—examples include engaging more decision makers, creating new modes of communication, or building subsystems that will support coordinated practice. While ultimately essential, these accomplishments can be initially discounted by any partner’s set of stakeholders. These gains are typically less visible, lacking evident immediate value to their universe of constituents. They do not generate immediate results.

At early Regional Hubs meetings, each group began planning for the best kinds of data and quantification of “success” to track systems change efforts. Many partners’ initial suggestions for quick wins were certainly attainable, although most were highly programmatic in nature, such as adding a greater number of career pathways to a district’s offering. As each group pursued its planning, this gravitational pull toward producing outcomes, making impact today, and churning activity against tangible, familiar purposes became a barrier to thinking systematically.

To move partners past that barrier, and redirect their energy toward affecting systems, we first tried taking short-term wins out of the equation entirely. We asked partners to only focus on long-term outcomes. To help frame this future focus, we created an Outcomes Matrix that has since become a

central tool for strategy formation and communication across the initiative. This tool organizes and names the foundational work of Regional Hubs, and describes the long-term indicators that constitute evidence of progress.

While this approach helped Hub anchors pull out of a programmatic focus, it swung the pendulum too far away from the now horizon. All anchors voiced concern from their stakeholders and organizational leaders: without any immediate and traditional indications of success, there was little faith in the collaborative approach or belief that meaningful impact was being made.

Through this experience, we recognized that a middle ground is critical to keep partners and stakeholders alike satisfied, motivated, and invested, while at the same time advancing systemic progress and working toward the then horizon. We also found that providing thought-starters to illustrate success in both the short- and long-term has benefit. Tangible examples gave partners new ways of understanding as well as ideas they could apply as they begin navigating uncharted territory and reimagining their systems goals. In this context, we found that the Outcomes Matrix could do more than assist leaders in embracing a systems mindset; it could also help partners locate and plan to achieve early wins that supported larger, long-term aims.

Getting to a place where big-picture thinking was valued and meaningful short-term progress was possible required time, conversation, patience, and belief in each other. As one partner commented, cross-sector progress is slow and “moves at the speed of trust.” For those of us charged with leading a cross-sector initiative, our ability to win partners’ confidence and consent to continue dedicating resources depends on helping them to satisfy their needs for meaningful and easily understood quick wins. At the same time, our job is also to help partners recognize the value of wins that are process-driven and support the long-term work underway. Our ideal is to carry out this work in a way that ensures that no momentum is lost and that all efforts contribute to the ultimate systems change goals.

2 Create a narrative that helps stakeholders understand the work they are seeing

Stakeholders, the constituencies served by partners in a cross-sector collaboration, are typically hungry for an initiative’s goals to be realized. At the same time, they are frequently “on the outside looking in” as initiative work unfolds, and their direct knowledge of the initiative may be minimal or nonexistent. Partners often feel a need, and in all cases have opportunity, to communicate with these parties as they proceed through the initiative. Given the nature of systems change work, early progress will likely be more structural than scintillating. Effective collaborations evolve over time.

Regional Hubs partners also found themselves needing to explain why the more visible actions taking place appeared to be somewhat scattershot. The partners understood the rationale for these discrete actions, and could see the big picture that framed them, though found it challenging to concisely and effectively share this understanding with others. Messages can be messy, making conveying the content of this work seem daunting. As a result, today most continue to struggle with building a narrative that conveys the nature and the power of their work in a way that is easy to grasp.

In his eight-step methodology for leading change, Dr. John Kotter speaks to the power that effective, proactive communications and understandable short-term wins have to “undermine the credibility of cynics and self-serving resistors.”¹ This is an apt articulation of why the initiative team continues to push Regional Hub leaders to make their case about how the approach of a cross-sector network can lead to sustained systems change and to achieving real benefits for stakeholders. Leaders’ inclination is often to focus on marketing their networks and attracting new players. This activity is valuable and needed, and can be bolstered by sharper illumination of the true difference systems-focused collaboration across sectors can make. For example, we are working with Hubs to help them better define and describe the changes made by working with the Regional Hub by asking: What would the path for students look like if all sectors were not engaging in this process together? What might the future have been if this network never existed? What is the change in individual lives that can come from this effort? Pursuing this narrative track has helped some regions begin to tell a collective story, position their respective institutions within the fabric of this story, and describe how early wins are important first steps to lasting progress.

Initiative technical assistance providers can certainly support partners in creating an effective narrative. In the case of Regional Hubs, our team offered a point of view that explained how the initiative vision connected to the on-the-ground actions taking place in the collaboration. As the initiative proceeded, we increasingly employed communication exercises as part of grantee convenings and in other interactions with individual regions. We supplemented our own abilities by engaging with outside communications expertise and generating key messages that provided a basis for common understanding, as well as draft materials that could be adapted and used by partner networks. A significant component of this work involved modeling that communication functions must go beyond recruiting strategies, and really begin with identity, content generation, and shared understanding among all stakeholders.

Developing and telling their story externally has an additional positive consequence for initiative partners—articulating a narrative for stakeholder’s results in deeper internalization of the initiative strategy for those doing the work. In our case, it was very helpful for partners to strive to explain how early process wins will fuel systemic changes that can transform student outcomes. From both the external and internal perspectives, there is a persuasive argument for storytelling’s power as a core function and means for growing cohesion, engagement, and ultimately sustained investment in a cross-sector collaboration. As Kotter states, “Short-term wins have a way of building momentum that turns neutral people into supporters, and reluctant supporters into active helpers.”²

3 Build a foundation that fits all sectors

This principle begins with a statement that will not surprise our readers: Investing in partner capacity will likely be a key ingredient in a multi-sector initiative aimed at systems change. Much of any initiative team’s work will focus on enabling a subset of players to provide ongoing support for all their respective partners, to expand and nurture existing networks, and to help all participants coalesce around compelling collective goals.

Of particular relevance to Regional Hubs was the need for lead partners to fuel relationships, form and articulate their visions, and frame how those visions aligned with the existing initiatives and interests

of partners working in different sectors. These elements became the glue that created cohesion in the collaboration, and they continue to propel collective progress today.

A helpful early step featured anchor organizations (i.e., lead partners) working to facilitate broad agreement on a guiding principle or “north star” that resonated with all partners. A natural dynamic in naming a single aspiration stems from the reality that each partner carries its own identity and mission into the conversation, and may seek to influence the group direction based on their individual focus. While this circumstance is typical to any group visioning effort, when working across sectors we need to be alert to this dynamic playing out at a larger scale. When a majority of initial participants are from one sector, and when that sector has a “louder” voice as a result, partners from other sectors may feel marginalized. Because the Linked Learning approach has been primarily associated with secondary education, it was important for partners from the postsecondary and workforce sectors to not feel that their roles were “in service” of an agenda led by school districts.

Anchor organizations, with our encouragement and support, worked hard to convey the interdependency between sectors and institutions involved in the collaboration, and to push all participants to engage in arriving at a truly shared agenda. Anchors needed the ability to guide an inclusive process, and to facilitate a vision that captures and advances the aspirations of all sectors and institutions at the table, while anticipating the aims of future participants. To this end, it is noteworthy that the anchors in the majority of regions are themselves composed of multi-sector organizations that have equal influence and responsibility for their network’s design and implementation.

In practice, the experience in Regional Hubs was less about vision or goal-setting, and more about building a collective understanding among all partners regarding the needs of their various sectors, the problems those sectors currently face, and the potential for cross-sector collaboration to accomplish what no institution or sector could achieve alone. At the outset, partners took turns sharing their perspectives and identifying intersections between their respective aspirations. Here again, reaching a new and shared level of understanding and trust required an investment of time and patience from all partners. But the initiative could not have proceeded productively without it—and this is perhaps a perfect example of an early win that was vital to the work, though not visible or immediately perceived as highly valuable by all stakeholder groups.

Connecting the Now and Then

As initiative partners adopted a systems lens, and as our initiative team came to better understand the importance partners placed on quick wins, we all improved our ability to balance near- and long-term aspects of our collective work.

Two examples are illustrated below. One involves work-based learning—a core component of Linked Learning that involves opportunities for students to apply core academic content and technical training in real-world workplaces, helping them develop the skills, competencies, and dispositions that are critical to career success. The other involves postsecondary education—a vital vehicle to higher-wage work for people of all backgrounds, with low-income and first-in-family candidates often facing challenges related to access, readiness, and persistence toward a postsecondary credential.

Through workshoping and iteration with lead partners in each region, we are continuing to collaborate with partners to consider both short- and long-term needs, and to identify actions that can be initiated against both horizons. Equally important, we seek to ensure that actions in the “now” and “then” horizons will reinforce each other. The bulleted items below represent sample short- and long-term actions that are mutually reinforcing.

Work-Based Learning	Postsecondary Education
<p>PROGRESS NOW</p> <p>We need more work-based learning opportunities for students today.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Conduct internship campaign with employers > Contract with intermediaries to add placements 	<p>PROGRESS NOW</p> <p>We need more high school graduates to be ready for college today.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Increase dual enrollment course offerings > Expand number of summer bridge programs
<p>TRANSFORMATION THEN</p> <p>We need to build a system that allows our region to scale and sustain work-based learning opportunities for all students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Convene intermediaries to build trust and collaboration, and support development of shared approaches > Create structures to coordinate student offerings among employers and school districts 	<p>TRANSFORMATION THEN</p> <p>We need seamless transitions for high school graduates entering college.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Build capacity of intermediary organizations that support K-14 partnerships, including investing general fund district dollars > Build systems for ongoing joint professional development for district and postsecondary faculty

Concluding Thoughts

The hard truth is that cross-sector systems change work is difficult, and no one approach can perfectly accommodate for all of the history, perspectives, goals, and values that partners and their stakeholders bring to a given collaboration. In any circumstance, balancing short- and long-term success is aided by collective decision-making and shared understanding. As soon as possible, and in a systems context that initiative leaders are typically tasked to provide, all involved must agree on the wins being targeted, and those wins must be communicated to stakeholders clearly and frequently. Partners must also know and expect that this work relies on a process of continuous improvement and learning—a process in which concerns are voiced, viewpoints are widened, and ideas are welcomed.

In Practice

The following pages describe unique aspects of the strategy for cross-sector collaboration, considering opportunities “now” as well as “then”, in each of the four Linked Learning Regional Hubs.



East Bay



The Easy Bay Regional Hub is facilitated by its anchor organization, the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. As a membership organization with a strong focus on convening and relationship-building, the Hub continues to evolve as its leaders explore ways to meaningfully network the many existing local and regional education and workforce initiatives. In this region, launching another campaign to show value or build buy-in for the Hub would only create more “noise” in an already crowded and initiative-fatigued landscape.

Instead, leaders have worked to create a narrative that articulates the role and value of the Hub as a regional connector that works in relationship with other collaborative initiatives underway. They demonstrate the value of the Hub by leveraging the Chamber’s inherent

expertise in partnership development—brokering new relationships between otherwise siloed education and industry players and expanding the regional network, partnership by partnership.

For example, this team achieved an early success when it worked with partners to establish a new relationship between key players at a local community college and a locally-based national research facility. Connecting these partners produced an opportunity to create internships for five students in the college’s cyber-security program. The project then became a stepping stone for increased engagement by the research lab at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, and laid the groundwork for a successful grant proposal and participation in a larger statewide network.

Hub leaders are hopeful that this and other short-term wins can fuel ongoing, longer-term momentum and engagement of industry and education partners across the region. They are currently exploring ways to maintain the careful balance of undertaking unassuming efforts to build regional capacity for collective action, while demonstrating value that partners attribute to the Hub’s efforts. To this end, the team seeks to leverage existing networks of industry, employer and workforce development leaders and their local education partners. By facilitating these players in neutral spaces where they can begin to connect around regional economic development goals and produce more quick wins, the Chamber believes partners will become motivated to continue creating deeper, mutually beneficial relationships in support of career pathways. These collaborations can in turn fuel a larger narrative that ties the partners’ work—and early wins—to larger and longer-term regional impact.

Tulare-Kings



The Tulare-Kings region has an extensive history with Linked Learning. It is the home of mentor school district Porterville Unified—one of the first districts in California to implement the Linked Learning approach—and boasts other strong Linked Learning pathways in districts such as Visalia Unified and Dinuba Unified. Linked Learning district directors were also regularly convened through a community of practice, the Tulare-Kings Linked Learning Collaborative.

From this foundation, the Regional Hub anchor partners had considerable momentum in their efforts to enhance the quality and consistency of regional career pathways by broadening engagement from postsecondary and workforce sector partners as well as from smaller, less engaged school districts. By leveraging California Career Pathways Trust funds, the

Hub leadership team made highly valuable short-term progress through activities such as joint faculty-teacher professional development programming, curriculum mapping sessions, and the creation of working groups to plan against priority focus areas.

These activities allowed faculty and staff to engage with peers from partner organizations, helped participants better understand complementary systems and cultures, and seeded trusting relationships that fueled positive, tangible outcomes for students and organizations. At the district level, there is an increased number and improved quality of Linked Learning and career technical education pathways, including application in smaller districts that entered the collaboration with less historic Linked Learning involvement. Postsecondary partners have likewise found new ways to meaningfully engage in pathway development, resulting in smoother transitions for students.

As more partners joined and benefited from these visible activities, a refocusing of Hub efforts was needed to maintain momentum. The team increased its attention on strengthening and articulating its long-term purpose and identity. The Hub communicated a shift among its partners—it would transition from a “grant funded consortia” to a “regional partnership.” Various regional efforts were consolidated into the Tulare-Kings College and Career Collaborative, with a mission to “build structure[s] to support and sustain all of the current efforts around college and career—to include Linked Learning academies, traditional career technical education pathways, and counseling and student supports.”³

During this transition, Regional Hub leaders met regularly with network members—including district leaders, community college presidents, and employer champions—to articulate the value-add of a regional effort and solicit cross-sector support. In many cases, Regional Hub outreach was supported by teachers, faculty, and employers who had directly benefited from the Hub’s professional development activities and convenings.

Today, the Tulare-Kings Hub has solidified the Collaborative as “a regional partnership to support college and career readiness, Linked Learning, and high quality pathways to strengthen the regional economy.”⁴ The Collaborative, convened by the Tulare County Office of Education, now consists of a cross-sector steering committee, workgroups designed to implement regional strategies, and communities of practice that help practitioners build professional skills to support regional activities. Notably, the Collaborative is co-chaired by a school district superintendent and a community college president, rather than by a county office of education or work-based learning intermediary as with past regional efforts, which demonstrates an important shift in the region’s leadership capacity. Collaborative operations are also funded by direct investments from nearly all of the school districts in Tulare and Kings counties. The region is indeed on its way to transitioning from a grant-funded collaborative to a regional partnership of invested and committed leaders.

Long Beach



From its inception, the Long Beach Regional Hub was a seemingly natural expansion of the renowned Long Beach College Promise partnership. This collaboration involves the secondary, postsecondary (both two-year and four-year colleges), and workforce development sectors, along with the Mayor's office. It has yielded increasingly positive student outcomes for each participating institution and has attracted substantial investment to support continued innovations and progress. From the initiative's onset, the primary focus in this region has been increasing and expanding the quality, consistency, and scale of Linked Learning pathways. As a Linked Learning mentor school district, Long Beach Unified was seen as a valuable resource to its surrounding districts, many of which were invested in—and funded through—California Career Pathways Trust funds to scale Linked Learning pathways.

Hub leaders began by setting an infrastructure to engage all partners and generate activities and outcomes needed to scale pathways. Partners met to discuss their pain points and priorities, learn together, and pursue a shared agenda with items such as increasing faculty professional development opportunities and standardizing work-based learning curriculum. These efforts resulted in significant short-term progress: some districts adopted Linked Learning practices and structures, some began designing wall-to-wall pathways (small schools or academies dedicated to a single career focus), and others improved the quality of existing pathways.

However, the leadership team knew from the onset that these efforts, which were substantive and productive for each of the respective organizations, were only part of the mosaic needed to achieve the long-term intent to create scaled, sustainable, high-quality Linked Learning pathways across the region. These activities focused on action by secondary partners, too often failed to meaningfully engage critical postsecondary and workforce partners, simply due to the nature and content of the activities. While broader partnership was the intent, the capacity of Long Beach-based organizations was stretched as they worked to balance competing local and regional priorities.

Related, one of the inherent strengths of this regional effort—starting from the solid Long Beach College Promise and naming this group to anchor and facilitate development of the broader collaboration—posed its own challenge. The strategy of building out from the Promise and its mission

to extend a college education to every student in the Long Beach Unified School District was hampered by its strong, Long Beach-centric identity. Hub leaders wondered how best to expand beyond strong local partnerships to create buy-in, ownership, and shared identity across the emerging regional network.

This was navigated by establishing an initiative leadership team of primary partners from across the Los Angeles region. The team invested in and worked through a process to build trust and relationships, while gaining insight into the motivations and needs of each partner at the table and arriving at an understanding of what all held in common. This process yielded a new identity and shared mission: Advancing Linked Learning Innovation Network (ALL-IN). ALL-IN was designed to provide latitude for individual organizations or communities to carry their own identities in the collective effort, for example, ALL-IN Cerritos or ALL-IN Centinela. The overarching identity reminds partners of their shared mission and investment—together, they are “all in” to improve outcomes for young people in the region’s schools and workforce. This shared identity is especially helpful when tough conversations arise, and when pacing or progress of the work seems slow.

A year of building trust, relationships, and shared purpose has set a foundation and collective agenda that is expanding collaboration across more players in a broader geography while fostering shared commitment to elevate the quality of Linked Learning pathways in the region.

San Bernadino



The San Bernadino Regional Hub partners began the initiative with a heightened sense of urgency for visible outcomes and impact given a high level of need throughout the region. This collective motivation fueled broad and active engagement from many sectors and stakeholder groups, resulting in formation of a cross-sector executive committee. Buy-in and visible support from these regional leaders generated important early activity to benefit students in classrooms today.

In the short-term, the executive committee began forging links between education, industry and workforce partners through coordinating shared activities such as regional financial aid events, career fairs, and college scholarship fundraisers. As members gained appreciation for Linked Learning and knowledge of one another's priorities, some began investing internal

resources to better connect across systems. For example, at California State University, San Bernadino the president began to increase the institution's knowledge of Linked Learning as well as its potential to help the university increase student preparedness and success. Sending 11 faculty to a Linked Learning conference and signing a memorandum of understanding to explore how the university can incent enrollment of high school students participating in Linked Learning are two illustrations of the president's commitment.

Partner investments grew capacity for coordination and collaboration across secondary and postsecondary systems. The result was a heightened awareness of this work for those implementing educational reforms at individual institutions, including faculty, teachers, coordinators, and industry partners. Momentum grew as participants saw current impact for students as well as the potential for long-term, more systemic gains. Appetite from leaders working to operationalize change in their sectors led the County Superintendent's office to provide regional career fairs, career pathway showcases, and tactical planning mini-grants to districts. Deeper involvement also pushed leaders to grapple with the difficulty of collaborating more fully across organizations, institutions, and sectors.

While these early wins were meaningful, they reinforced the challenges of scaling impact without a sustainable infrastructure to build the region's capacity for partnership and cross-sector system change. Conversations between Hub co-anchors—from three different sectors—pushed the work beyond the K-12 perspective and created healthy tension within the group. For the work to evolve and

sustain, the anchor team needed to likewise evolve, a process that required a substantial investment of time and came with a few missteps that the group experienced together. It also called for enough trust between partners to allow productive disagreements in designing the work. One partner described it as needing to go from “me” to “we,” and continually pushing back when the group began leaning toward “me” behaviors.

Though this deepening of relationships between partners was largely unseen, it set the stage for crucial conversations between the operational leads and Hub co-anchors, who asked for time to work together to get clear on the shared and integrated strategy for systemic change. They also described a need to focus on building the capacity of the regional leads and evolve their collaborative structures to allow them to work differently and collectively at all levels. This work is challenging but important, and includes rethinking and building relationships with complementary regional initiatives.

Making time to address these topics elevated the Hub co-anchors’ ability to scale the overall effort. They are shifting from being central characters to becoming activators of a broad network of regional partners. Their perspective has changed in powerful ways. Rather than feeling overwhelmed and responsible for advancing and coordinating every activity, they are now looking to partner organizations to take on and learn through projects aligned with their respective missions and expertise; this is a smart approach for growing capacity in a region with significant needs and intent to maximize the use of every resource.

EndNotes

- 1 Kotter, John. *The 8-Step Process for Leading Change*. Kotter International, 2012. <https://www.kotterinternational.com/8-steps-process-for-leading-change/>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 TK College + Career Collaborative. N.d. <https://sites.google.com/a/ersconnect.org/college-and-career-collaborative/>.
- 4 Ibid.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 info@jff.org
88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110 (HQ)
122 C Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001
505 14th Street, Suite 340, Oakland, CA 94612

WWW.JFF.ORG

