



California Master Plan for Career Education

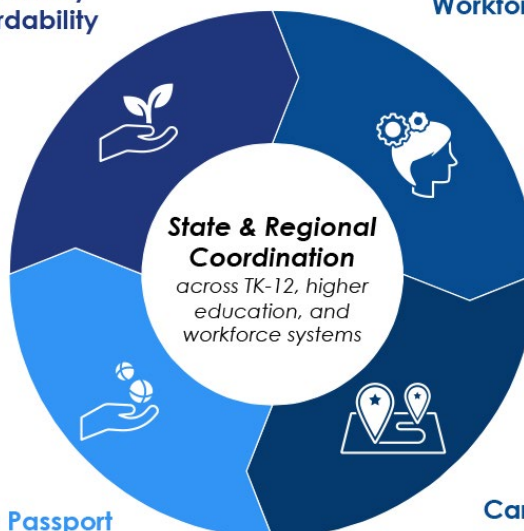
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Master Plan for Career Education will prepare all learners for the workforce of tomorrow by guiding California in its efforts to strengthen career pathways, prioritize hands-on learning and real-life skills, and advance access and affordability through streamlined collaboration and partnership so that all Californians can navigate toward career-sustaining jobs.

Master Plan for Career Education

Accessibility
& Affordability

Workforce Training



Career Passport

Career Pathways

Rapid changes in California’s economy, paired with persistent gaps in opportunity and economic mobility, are driving the need for California to take a fresh look at how the state prepares people for school and work. Currently, California has one of the widest gaps in income distribution in the country. The top 10 percent of earners—those who make an average of more than \$300,000 per year—earn 10 times more than families at the bottom 10 percent of the scale, who must scrape by on only \$29,000. This gap has been fueled by earnings gains among educated workers. Households with an earner who has a bachelor’s degree are making 33 percent more now than similar households did in 1980, while households in which no one has graduated from college have seen wages decline by 8 percent.ⁱ

In the 1960s, California’s Master Plan for Higher Education created a strong foundation for learning by delineating roles across various postsecondary education segments, including the California Community College, California State University, and University of California systems. This plan was predicated on a labor market that predominantly featured jobs requiring minimal formal education. Yet, as the 21st century unfolds, California’s economy and workforce have transformed. Schools, colleges, and workforce training providers need to create new strategies that allow systems to evolve and be more responsive to rapidly changing workforce needs, particularly with the advent of artificial intelligence and the recognition that learners should have the ability to upskill throughout their careers.

California has responded to this need by funding learning opportunities through a broad range of mechanisms, including TK–12 and postsecondary education; workforce training provided by workforce boards; adult schools; apprenticeships; and programs focused on specific populations such as students who are English language learners, people with disabilities, or people who are incarcerated. For example, Governor Gavin Newsom and the Legislature invested \$7.3 billion in efforts ranging from apprenticeships to strengthened education workforce pathways to climate innovation.ⁱⁱ

However, these education and training programs are resourced through numerous agencies, different base funding streams, and various specialized grant programs. Although these programs may have similar goals, they often require separate plans, applications, and implementation components. As a result, efforts are splintered, educators must scramble to secure the resources they need to sustain their work, and potential learners struggle to find the right training and job options to meet their goals.

The economic divide underscores the imperative for a more coherent career education infrastructure that is forward-looking, equitable, accessible, and aligned with California’s diverse needs. Degree attainment cannot be the only pathway to stable, well-paid work. Even though individuals with bachelor’s degrees earn significantly more over their lifetimes than those without, degrees are not a panacea, particularly in the absence of practical experience and social capital. Moreover, the financial burden of education poses significant barriers for many Californians, particularly as driven by the high cost of living and compounded by the complexities of accessing public benefits that would make education more affordable.

Therefore, in August 2023, Governor Gavin Newsom called for a new Master Plan for Career Education through the Freedom to Succeed Executive Order. He urged state agencies and institutions of higher education to increase equitable access to well-paid jobs by creating and strengthening education and training pathways that are responsive to the emerging needs of the economy and specific to sectors, regions, and individuals' skills and experience. These pathways will ensure that all Californians—whether young people just starting their first job searches or experienced workers seeking new careers—can find opportunities for high-paying and fulfilling career paths that do not require college degrees. By building these talent pipelines, the state can power economic growth and create more resilient communities in strategic sectors such as education, health care, and climate.

The Master Plan for Career Education provides a framework for responding to the complex, multifaceted challenges confronting California's labor market and educational landscape. This plan, which builds on the 1960 plan, acknowledges the shifting demographics of college attendees and the changing nature of work—with automation and artificial intelligence reshaping job categories and skill requirements—and provides flexibility to address new challenges that will emerge in the future. In addition to identifying priority areas for future action, it provides examples of work already underway that could be scaled and replicated to attain shared goals.

To support the development of the Master Plan for Career Education, representatives of state agencies and higher education provided initial strategies, regional partners convened community members to design solutions, and interest holders provided direct input on how to address persistent barriers to opportunity. Across all these forums, agencies and community members highlighted two central themes: Enhance coordination and address structural barriers that make it difficult for Californians to navigate education, workforce training, and public benefit systems.

The call to enhance coordination has focused on the need for spaces at the state and regional levels where educators, workforce training providers, employers, and community members can collaboratively forge career pathways tailored to the evolving economic landscape and the state's strategic sectors. A coordinated effort is crucial for capitalizing on programmatic funding opportunities and adapting to the demands of a workforce increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence and climate imperatives. Through collective action, resources can be optimized, enabling a more effective delivery of services statewide while ensuring that education and training programs provide stronger hands-on learning that is aligned with employment opportunities.

When envisioning specific interventions, agencies and the community frequently focused on the needs of specific populations and the unique challenges that hamper access to and successful completion of education and workforce training programs. For example, many interest holders spelled out the precise needs of people with disabilities, young people who are neither working nor in school ("opportunity youth"), and English language learners. However, when listing the structural changes that would unlock opportunity, they provided recommendations that are remarkably consistent and include

- improving interagency planning and coordination;
- strengthening data sharing;
- alerting learners to educational and job opportunities;
- ensuring people have chances to explore options in a hands-on way and to build connections with employers;
- providing “earn-and-learn” opportunities whereby people can be paid as they gain skills;
- developing stackable credentials that ensure learning opportunities are built on each other;
- creating stronger support for housing, food, childcare, transportation, health care, and other basic needs;
- offering navigators that help people access services and address challenges; and
- recognizing that populations are not monolithic and that individuals may have multiple identities and experiences that should be addressed holistically.

By taking a universal design approach—designing systems so they are inherently accessible to all learners regardless of their varied needs and circumstances—California could simultaneously expand access for a wide variety of learners and free up resources to provide more customized support for specific populations.

The Master Plan for Career Education calls for a coordinated, universal design approach through six primary areas of action:

1. Create a State Planning and Coordinating Body

Governor Gavin Newsom, working with the Legislature, should create a new statewide planning and coordinating body that brings together the state’s education segments, workforce training providers, and employers. The coordinating body should evaluate changing economic needs and demand for skills, develop sector-based and cross-sector strategies, create statewide goals, align federal and state plans, coordinate efforts to maximize funding, coordinate implementation of specific federal and state programs, codesign programs to address workforce opportunities, and connect with regions.

- By offering shared tools and resources, state agencies and institutions of higher education can provide seamless transitions for learners as they move across service providers. For example, they can work together to provide eTranscript California as the state’s postsecondary transcript platform, align college and career advising information, and use information from the Cradle-to-Career Data System to inform their decisions.
- With improved labor market information, state agencies and institutions of higher education can align programs with in-demand skills; ensure that the state is graduating enough people with high-demand

skills; support career navigation through student advising that uses common definitions across systems; and leverage the strategic sectors highlighted in the California Jobs First Economic Blueprint.

- Through reviewing economic changes and demands for new skills, the statewide planning and coordinating body should discuss and strategize implications for TK–12 and higher education curricula.

2. Strengthen Regional Coordination

The Governor’s Office should evaluate how successful regional coordination models can be expanded to create sustainable forums in which educators, workforce training providers, and employers work together with a clear division of responsibilities across partners.

- The first step in determining how best to leverage existing regional structures for more comprehensive coordination is to assess each region’s assets and challenges related to regional collaboration. By documenting processes for shared decision-making, this information could support action planning to strengthen collaborative processes and structures in each region in partnership with regional interest holders.
- When aligning regional coordinating efforts, regional coordinating bodies can place greater emphasis on strengthening employer engagement by, for example, identifying critical skills for the workplace and expanding opportunities for work-based learning, with a focus on building social capital and creating earn-and-learn opportunities such as paid internships and apprenticeships.
- Regions should develop mechanisms that coordinate funding for similar programs so educators can secure funding by submitting fewer proposals, track a consistent set of outcomes, and sustain resources over longer periods of time.

3. Support Skills-Based Hiring Through a Career Passport

State agencies and institutions of higher education should make it easier for employers to make hiring decisions based on individuals’ skills in addition to their academic credentials.

- To ensure that Career Passport provides information in a manner that will fit into hiring practices for specific sectors, the Office of Cradle-to-Career Data can lead a planning process that includes educators, workforce training professionals, and employers.
- As a way to build stronger pathways to state service jobs, the Career Passport can be used by CalHR to assess how apprenticeship, language skills, and service learning inform eligibility for jobs.

- Building on the California Jobs First Economic Blueprint, the state can identify additional sectors that could help inform the development of the Career Passport.
- By having a skills framework that is validated by both academics and employers, California employers can accelerate skills-based hiring practices and colleges can recognize skills and competencies for educational credit.

4. Develop Career Pathways for High School and College Students

While some students have access to career pathway opportunities, access is not the norm for all students. Pushing for universal availability and implementation of pathways programs would provide students from all backgrounds with clear roadmaps to gainful employment and career advancement. These pathways can be designed to provide experiential learning opportunities, shorten the time to a career, alleviate financial pressures, and empower individuals to actualize their dreams, all while contributing to social and economic mobility within communities.

- TK–12 and postsecondary agencies should establish career pathways that align with current and future statewide and regional workforce needs. These pathways can begin in high school and extend through postsecondary education and workforce training.
- Pathways should have built-in opportunities for high school students to take college courses (“dual enrollment”) that allow them to earn industry-recognized credentials and complete courses that count toward associate and bachelor’s degrees.
- High schools and colleges should provide students with opportunities to engage in work-based learning, including internships, service learning, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships.
- Educators should ensure that all students are able to explore their passions and career opportunities, including groups that have had less access to higher education, such as people with disabilities, people of color, and English language learners.
- TK–12 schools and colleges should provide support systems, such as advisory structures, that ensure that students are attached to caring professionals responsible for their guidance and welfare.
- TK–12 schools and colleges should adopt competency-based methods of documenting mastery of knowledge and skills.

5. Strengthen Workforce Training for Young People and Adults

For adults who need additional training and for opportunity youth, education and workforce development agencies should ensure access to education, workforce training, and jobs that allow them to advance in stable, well-paying career pathways.

- A service delivery network of job centers, community colleges, adult schools, extension centers, libraries, county jails, state prisons, and community-based organizations can create an affordable “no wrong door” approach to education and workforce training opportunities.
- By strengthening coordination, state agencies and institutions of higher education can deliver joint programs focused on specific populations, such as people with disabilities, English language learners, students in families with mixed-citizenship status, and people involved with the justice system.
- Sector-based pathways that are aligned with worker and opportunity youth needs, that use cohorts to encourage social connections, that include work-based learning, and that provide earn-and-learn opportunities can improve coordination between workforce training programs and community colleges.
- By strengthening coordinated faculty-led processes for reviewing skills, colleges can accelerate adoption of credit for prior learning to recognize skills, knowledge, and abilities gained outside of the classroom.

6. Increase Access to and Affordability of Education and Workforce Training

State agencies and institutions of higher education should ensure that eligible learners from all backgrounds and parts of the state can easily access education, workforce training, and public benefits that open doors to more rewarding, well-paying jobs.

- By addressing barriers that have historically made access to education and workforce training out of reach for some populations, state agencies and institutions of higher education can increase access and success for learners such as people with disabilities, opportunity youth, students whose parents did not attend college (“first-generation students”), and English language learners. They can also ensure that educators and workforce training providers have the skills to support those populations’ specific needs.
- By improving awareness of and access to public benefits, state agencies and institutions of higher education can support non-tuition costs for eligible students.
- Streamlining the eligibility process for public benefits and leveraging federal workforce dollars can support adult learners to pay for college courses.

- By working collaboratively with employers, education and workforce training providers can improve universal access to earn-and-learn opportunities, such as apprenticeships, paid internships, and service learning.

California’s Master Plan for Career Education is a forward-thinking response to the pressing need to make education and workforce training programs easier for all Californians to access and the need to address the ever-evolving economic landscape. The plan’s comprehensive approach—emphasizing state and regional coordination, the implementation of universal design principles, and the integration of innovative strategies—holds the promise of transforming the state’s educational and workforce training systems. By fostering collaboration and simplifying access, the plan is poised to create inclusive pathways to prosperity that resonate with California’s diverse communities. It not only seeks to dismantle the structural barriers that hinder economic mobility but also serves as a model for ensuring that education and training adapt to the demands of a dynamic workforce. The Master Plan for Career Education stands as a testament to California’s commitment to equipping all students and workers—regardless of background or circumstance—with the tools necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Endnotes

i Thorman, T., & Payares-Montoya, D. (2024). *Income inequality in California*. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/income-inequality-in-california/>

ii Governor’s Office of California. (2023). *Freedom to succeed: Career education executive order*. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/8.31.23-Career-Education-Executive-Order.pdf>