Intersegmental Partnerships and Data Sharing: Promising Practices From the Field

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Collaboration between K–12 public school districts and higher education, as well as between education institutions, workforce groups, and community organizations, has the potential to improve college and labor market outcomes for individual students and for local communities. However, improvement efforts demand the use of longitudinal data to define the problem, set goals, and monitor progress. California has been behind in building such a longitudinal data system—linked across pre-K through postsecondary sectors—to track individuals' education and labor market outcomes. In the absence of a statewide systematic method for tracking students' educational trajectories and employment outcomes, education institutions and community organizations are working in regional partnerships to effectively use data to improve student outcomes.

California's new accountability and continuous improvement framework relies on district and school leaders using multiple measures of school performance to identify where change is needed, and to monitor carefully the development, testing, and evaluation of improvement strategies over time. This process of continuous improvement requires that local leaders have access to research-based evidence and strategies that they can implement in their schools and opportunities to learn from one another about what works, under which conditions, and for which students. PACE's series of Continuous Improvement Briefs aims to support education leaders at all levels in learning how to improve the performance of their schools and students.

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With increased efforts to improve the educational outcomes of students, particularly college access and postsecondary degree completion, educational institutions turn to data-driven decision-making practices to inform improvement efforts. Yet, educators and community leaders often lack the necessary data to make informed decisions. Data are often limited to a single institution, leaving administrators without important information about students' educational experiences prior to arriving or after leaving a particular institution. The absence of data sharing practices often results in misinformed and misaligned expectations across educational segments, fragmented educational pathways, and ineffective improvement efforts.

Large-scale efforts to address the need for data sharing and communication have surfaced in recent years. The California Department of Education launched the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) in 2009, allowing K–12 school districts to share student information. This system allows a single segment (K–12 school districts) to share student information but does not extend beyond high school graduation. Cal-PASS Plus and California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI), non-profit organizations supported by public and philanthropic funding, merge K–12 and higher education data to reduce gaps in information on students' educational pathways. While these efforts have expanded data sharing and data use opportunities for educational institutions at all levels, the comprehensive educational and workforce data across California that are necessary to effectively inform efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes are not yet in place.

To more directly address these challenges, regional intersegmental partnerships are emerging across the state. In these partnerships, stakeholders from multiple educational, workforce, and community sectors work collaboratively to improve the educational attainment and workforce outcomes of the students they serve. Although partnerships' goals may differ, partnerships often share a common focus on data sharing and data-informed improvement efforts. Through these regional efforts, important lessons have emerged.

In this brief, we share these lessons and highlight promising practices from intersegmental partnerships across California. Drawing on more than 30 interviews of key leaders from 27 education and community organizations, a survey of higher education administrators, and an extensive document review, we describe the efforts of local leaders to solve regional challenges related to student outcomes and economic demands. We focus specifically on the conditions necessary for data sharing and current practices in data management, analysis and reporting, and use of data to inform improvement efforts.

Leadership, Trust, and Commitment

Forging a sustainable partnership across education, community, and workforce institutions requires attention to the organizational conditions that support effective collaboration.

Leadership

Sustainable partnerships require more than one dynamic leader. While commitment of senior leadership in each institution is paramount, the dedication of administrators and staff who carry out the work of the partnership is also critical. Moreover, commitment of mid-level administrators mitigates some of the challenges associated with leadership turnover, ensuring the work moves forward during transitions.

Building Trust and Shared Purpose

Building trust is critical to the success of any partnership. For intersegmental partnerships, this means leaders from individual organizations must operate from a sense of shared purpose and a trust in others' intentions. The work of the partnership makes explicit that improving student outcomes does not rely on a single institution but rather on a set of organizations working with shared goals and strategies.

Commitment

Partners must commit to this shared purpose and to tackling systems-level obstacles that hinder common goals. A sense of collective commitment creates cohesion among the partner organizations by channeling the strengths and resources of each participating institution to sustain partnership efforts. Leaders must also commit to human and fiscal resources. Investments must be made to bring partners together, expand the roles of leaders and staff (or hire additional personnel), and acquire the technology for data sharing, analysis, and reporting.

Data Sharing and Management

Identifying Purpose and Aligning Metrics

As partners come together, they must agree on the problem they are working together to solve. While a shared purpose is most often grounded in a need identified by one of the partner organizations, it often cannot be solved by a single institution. Identifying a purpose often relies on looking at data, but it does not necessarily demand the sharing of data. A single data point may indicate a regional challenge, from which collaborative solutions may be developed. Once a shared purpose is articulated, goals must be identified and metrics aligned to focus the work and to measure the success of the partnership.

The African American Regional Educational Alliances (AAREA) provides a strong example (see Figure 1) of how community organizations play a key role in bringing segments together to solve a shared problem. AAREA's review of publicly available data revealed that African American students in the Bay Area were graduating high school and completing college entrance course requirements (A-G courses) at substantially lower rates than their peers, resulting in decreased access to higher education options. Through collaborative work with K–12 and higher education leaders in the Bay Area, the partnership identified a shared purpose around supporting African American students' access to four-year colleges. Partners in AAREA then defined measurable goals and aligned metrics, and subsequently improved student achievement in STEM courses and higher rates of A-G course completion, to support the shared purpose.

Data Sharing and Data Management

Bringing data together from multiple segments is essential to understanding the focus of the partnership and measuring progress on stated goals. Leaders need to broker data sharing agreements and decide how data will be exchanged, merged, and managed.

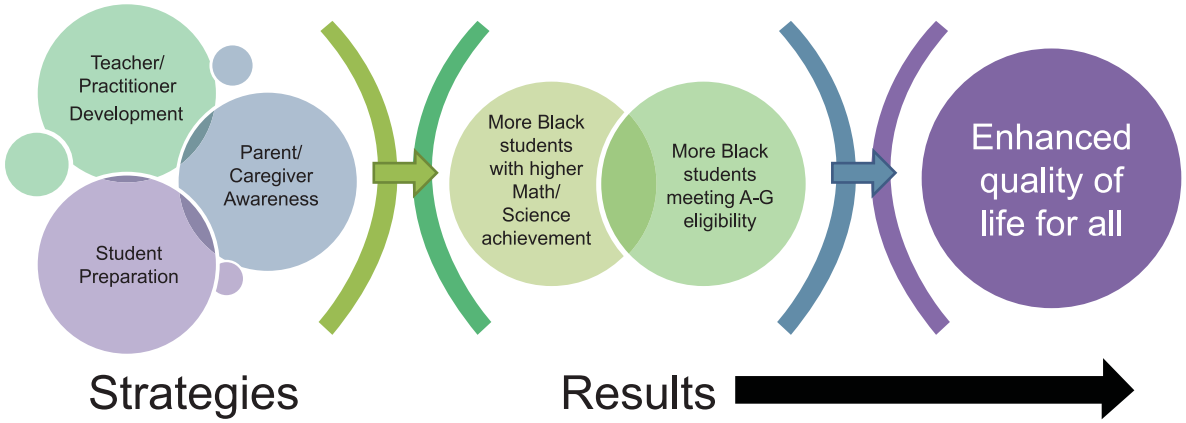
- ***Legal Requirements***: The protection of students' privacy is a critical consideration, and legally mandated, when sharing data. Partnerships must ensure they completely understand applicable state and federal guidelines (i.e., FERPA) and how they apply within their partnership contexts.

- ***Data Sharing MOUs***: Due to the ethical and legal requirements that guide data sharing, clearly articulated memorandums of understanding (MOUs) are imperative to partnership efforts. In the MOUs, partners should specify the purpose of sharing data, the specific data elements to be shared, the manner in which data will be securely transferred, and the personnel responsible for managing and storing the data. Partnership leaders must consult with institutional attorneys and contemplate context-specific uses of data.

- ***Data Exchange and Management***: When various agencies agree to share data, either aggregate or student-level, leaders must address the technological demands of such work, including how to transfer the data and how to manage and store the data. Options may include developing a centralized data warehouse or working with third-party data management providers or non-profit organizations aimed at providing intersegmental data services.

- ***Data Matching***: The sharing of data often requires technical skills to merge data from multiple institutions. Unlike many states, California has no consistent student identification number across education segments. As a result, matching student-level data across institutions requires a host of imperfect techniques and results in imperfect matches.

Figure 1. AAREA's Theory of Change: Alignment of Purpose, Goals, and Improvement Strategies



Source: African American Regional Educational Alliances Theory of Change Model as depicted in December 15, 2015 Summary Report prepared by DataUse Consulting Group. Used with permission from AAREA.

Data Analysis and Reporting

When data are shared, partnerships may analyze the data to better understand the collective problem the partnership is trying to solve, to inform improvement efforts, and to monitor progress towards achieving goals. Partnerships often then report results from analysis to illustrate collective impact.

• ***Individual-Level Data Analysis***: Intersegmental partnerships that collect and analyze individual-level data are able to conduct longitudinal analyses, which are particularly relevant for partnership goals focused on transitions between segments and long-term outcomes.

The Santa Ana Partnership matches individual-level data from Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) and Santa Ana College to monitor college readiness and persistence. Leaders examine high school GPA, math and English high school courses completed, and other factors to identify the strongest predictors of community college success and to determine curricular implications for increasing students' academic preparation. As part of this monitoring, the Santa Ana Partnership examines the percentage of SAUSD students who place into college-level English and the number of Santa Ana College students who transfer into four-year universities.

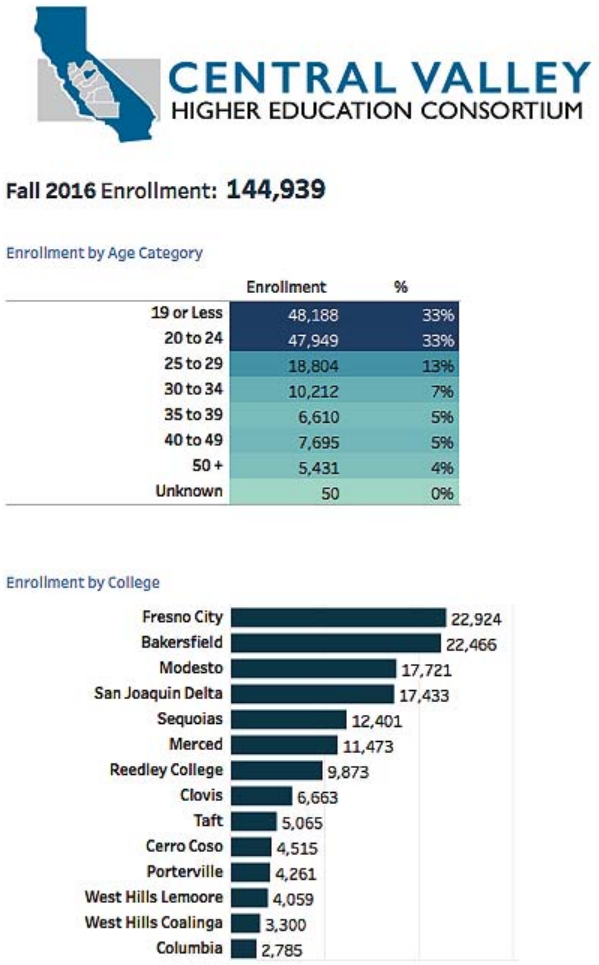
• ***Aggregate-Level Data Analysis***: Partnerships that focus analyses on summary-level data (a) minimize the fiscal and human resources needed to manage data and (b) find sufficient information to identify regional patterns in aggregate student outcomes.

OneFuture Coachella Valley's Regional Plan identifies several metrics from the region's K–12 and higher education segments to monitor long-term impact. The aggregate-level data align with the regional plan five-year goals: at least 30% of high school students enrolled in career academy, at least 80% of high school students have personalized graduation plans, a 10% increase in high school graduation rates, 85% of seniors complete the FAFSA, a 10% increase in college-going rates, a 10% increase in Cal Grant award uptakes, and $1 million generated annually by endowed scholarship structure.

• ***Data Interpretation***: To maximize the use of data to inform partnership efforts, personnel from participating organizations often require support in interpreting data analysis and results. Professional development in the area of data analysis can improve efforts towards sound interpretation of data, facilitate consensus around next steps, and strengthen collaborative efforts.

• ***Data Reporting***: The public reporting on metrics aligned to a shared purpose is an important use of data for many partnerships. Reporting may serve several functions, including internal progress monitoring and evaluation, accountability to stakeholders and funders, and external marketing. Reporting data, no matter the function, is a demanding activity requiring numerous decisions regarding which data points to include and how to effectively and transparently report results. The Central Valley Higher Education Consortium's Data Dashboard (see Figure 2) is an example of a reporting tool developed by an intersegmental partnership. The Dashboard compiles data collected by California's Community Colleges Chancellor's Office about the outcomes of postsecondary students in the Central Valley. The Dashboard allows access to results related to college enrollment, transfer rates, student units, degree attainment, financial aid receipt, student demographics, and English and math remediation rates.

Figure 2. Central Valley Data Dashboard



Source: Central Valley Higher Education Consortium Regional Data Dashboard via www.cvhec.org.

Data Informed Practices and Policy

While analyzing and reporting data is important work, it is the use of data to inform policy and practice which determines the success of intersegmental data partnerships. The following examples demonstrate the diverse ways that intersegmental data can be applied to advancing educational and career outcomes for all students:

- ***Identifying College Readiness Interventions***: Leaders from The Long Beach College Promise (LBCP) analyzed high school course-taking and performance (GPA) patterns and found that high school students may not be receiving the academic preparation needed to succeed in college. Students were not required to take four years of math in high school, a critical component for success in postsecondary STEM pathways. This finding prompted new graduation requirements that include four years of math.

- ***Increasing Educational Opportunities to Meet Regional Demand***: To address a lack of qualified candidates to fill regional demand in the nursing field, OneFuture Coachella Valley used data to build a regional talent pipeline from high school to work. They established career pathways in high school, invested resources in programs at local colleges, and offered internship opportunities. The partnership is developing a data system to monitor pathway participation and completion, as well as key milestones, for other labor market needs.

- ***Improving Teacher Education Programs***: L.A. Compact is using intersegmental data to improve teacher training and practice. With data from teacher education programs and LAUSD, partners monitor teachers' career progression, such as employment status, job assignment, and classroom observation data. L.A. Compact facilitates cycles of inquiry with leaders from the teacher education programs and LAUSD to discuss implications for training, to identify best practices, and to determine areas for improvement in teacher development.

Additional resources

For more information on the intersegmental partnerships highlighted in this brief, please visit their websites.

- OneFuture Coachella Valley: onefuturecv.org
- Central Valley Higher Education Consortium: cvhec.org
- The Long Beach College Promise: longbeachcollegepromise.org
- The African American Regional Educational Alliances: theaarea.org

Implications

Intersegmental partnerships continue to grow as regional initiatives to improve college and employment outcomes. Through explicitly collaborative work, intersegmental partnerships are creating the conditions necessary to address and eliminate the barriers to students' college attainment and stronger workforce outcomes. Data plays a vital role in many of these partnerships' strategic plans, including the identification of collective problems and articulation of key goals, informing change efforts, and progress monitoring and reporting.

Our research magnifies the need for a statewide data platform, a need that has long been identified by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike. An effective platform would utilize universal student identifiers that promote efficiency in merging data across segments, minimizing the fiscal and human resources currently needed to align cross-institutional data. Moreover, such a system would allow intersegmental partnerships to focus on the important work of improvement rather than the work of sharing data.

Despite the challenges associated with data, partnerships across the state are overcoming these difficulties and making great strides in their improvement efforts. Our research suggests several implications for practitioners:

1. Before data can be shared, leaders from multiple organizations must trust each other, commit to the shared purpose of the partnership, and allocate appropriate resources.

2. Leaders must develop explicit goals for solving an identified regional problem in order to build and sustain commitment across institutions.

3. Leaders need to broker data sharing agreements and decide how data will be exchanged, merged, and managed.

4. Collaborative work entails specific strategies to accurately interpret data, inform interventions, and monitor a partnership's progress.

5. Experienced leaders and technical assistance providers should share promising practices with emerging partnerships across the state, as partnerships often struggle with common challenges.

6. Developing and sustaining intersegmental partnerships are costly. Private foundations, public agencies, and the state play important roles in funding these efforts.

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