



Scaling Quality Work-Based Learning for California's Rising Workforce

Implications for Employer Engagement

California has made historic investments to expand career-connected learning—through initiatives like **Jobs First**, the **Regional K-16 Collaboratives**, **Golden State Pathways**, the **K-12 Strong Workforce Program** and the **Learning-Aligned Employment Program (LAEP)**. All share a common goal: to ensure every learner—regardless of background—has access to seamless pathways connecting education and work.

Despite this aligned vision, these initiatives have been **implemented in silos**, each operating under distinct structures and timelines. The result is **fragmented employer engagement, uneven access for students and limited infrastructure** to scale high-quality, paid and equitable work-based learning (WBL) statewide.

Los Angeles County—with its vast and diverse ecosystem of 80 school districts, 21 community colleges, seven workforce boards and 10 million residents—illustrates both **the promise and the complexity** of this challenge. The region's lessons can help inform statewide solutions.

Challenges to Scaling Work-Based Learning: Lessons from L.A.

1 Fragmented Employer Engagement and Lack of Regional Coordination: Multiple systems engage employers independently, creating duplicative outreach and confusion. Employers face uncoordinated requests and inconsistent processes for partnering with schools and colleges.

3 Complex Liability and "Employer-of-Record" Systems: Liability and payroll systems for minors and students vary widely. Employers must navigate multiple onboarding and compliance systems across agencies, discouraging participation in paid WBL.

5 Limited Data Infrastructure: California lacks a unified framework to track who participates in WBL, how experiences vary in quality and what outcomes they yield—limiting accountability and continuous improvement.

2 Insufficient Institutional and Employer Capacity: K-12 and higher education institutions often lack dedicated staff or clear structures for employer engagement. Many employers also lack internal staff or incentives to manage WBL programs, making participation sporadic and unsustainable.

4 Weak Integration Between WBL and Academic Curriculum: Most experiences remain "random acts of WBL" disconnected from coursework. Educators lack time and professional development to embed WBL into instruction or assess learning outcomes.

6 Insufficient Funding for Paid WBL: Few sustainable funding sources exist for student wages. LAEP's elimination in 2023 left a major gap for college students, and existing workforce and K-12 funds cannot fully cover student pay. Most employer-paid internships still target four-year college students.



Recommendations for Building a Statewide WBL Infrastructure

1 Establish a Two-Tiered State and Regional Support System:

- Create a **Statewide Talent Development Support Center** to coordinate technical assistance, quality standards and data, alongside **Regional Talent Development Support Hubs** to align local implementation.
- These hubs—co-led by workforce boards, colleges and K–12 systems—would centralize employer engagement, manage Employer-of-Record systems and operate regional sector intermediaries.

2 Expand Institutional and Employer Staffing Capacity:

- Set clear state expectations and model standards for WBL coordination.
- Encourage K–12 and higher ed systems to contract with intermediaries or workforce partners for delivery.
- Create **incentives for employers** to hire dedicated talent pipeline or education partnership staff to embed WBL into long-term workforce strategies.

3 Invest in a Sustainable Wage-Subsidy Infrastructure:

- Develop a coordinated funding mechanism that braids state, federal, employer and philanthropic dollars to subsidize student wages across systems.
- Operate through the Regional Hubs to streamline access and reporting.

4 Build a Shared Data and Accountability Framework:

- Align definitions and metrics for participation, quality and outcomes across systems.
- Integrate with the **California Cradle-to-Career Data System** to track WBL participation and measure its impact on equitable economic mobility.



California has built a bold vision for career-connected learning—but achieving it requires investment in **infrastructure, coordination and capacity**, not just programs. Now is the time for state leaders, funders and employers to **co-invest in the systems and partnerships** that make meaningful, paid work-based learning possible for every young person.