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Building job-based learning bridges with schools

by Tom Chorneau

(Calif.) After making significant progress in establishing worked-based and linked learning programs, California schools have struggled to find enough employers willing to provide all the job-shadowing and apprenticeship experiences the student demand calls for.

In what might be a critical first step in closing that gap, the California Chamber of Commerce in partnership with the Linked Learning Alliance has forged agreements with four regional business organizations that have agreed to begin building new bridges between the private sector and school districts that are interested in career-pathway education.

Participating in the campaign are the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, the Sacramento Metro Chamber, and the Oxnard and Fresno chambers of commerce.

Supported with a \$544,000 grant from the California Workforce Development Board, the business groups have agreed to develop some form of outreach to schools in the coming year.

The chambers were purposefully given a lot of flexibility to allow them to reflect local needs, said Rebecca Sterling, spokeswoman for Linked Learning Alliance.

“Each chamber is looking to focus on what works in their community,” she said. “We’re not trying to implement the same approach in each area, but we’re allowing it to come up from the community.”

The Los Angeles Area Chamber, for instance, is looking to increase the number of its business members who are partnering with local linked learning academies. In Oxnard, the chamber wants to build a program that connects employers with high school students. Fresno is creating an employment expo, and Sacramento officials are looking to expand existing leadership and professional network programs.

California has invested heavily in career technical education, having committed close to \$900 million over the next three years for grants supporting a variety of instruction, including worked-based and linked learning.

A key funding requirement is that programs integrate academic benchmarks with career and professional training. Many of the new programs are aimed at high-demand fields such a robotics, information technology, health care and emergency services.

Research has shown that combining demanding classroom instruction with real-world job experiences has proven attractive to at-risk students, both in bringing them into the classroom and keeping them engaged.

But one of the biggest hurdles so far has been finding private sector partners. Cost is one factor. Employers—especially smaller ones—are generally reluctant to reassign the personnel to take on the task. And even for the biggest employers, labor laws and court rulings have chilled the whole concept of unpaid internships.

There is some evidence, however, that human resource managers have not always had a good understanding of those labor restrictions. Advocates for work-based education point out that the rules allow unpaid internships when the work activity is to the benefit of the student, not the employer.

As the agreement between the chamber groups illustrates, an increasing number of company executives are growing concerned about the status of the future workforce.

A recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California found that by 2025, the state will need to produce an additional 1 million career-ready college graduates to meet employers' needs. At current rates, only 40 percent of California's 2.2 million young adults hold an associate degree or higher, and many don't have the skills needed to succeed in college or the workforce, according to the PPIC.

Christopher Cabaldon, president of Linked Learning Alliance, said there is great promise in improving those numbers through work-based education.

“This approach to education is helping to create a disciplined, prepared, and productive future workforce for California, ready to succeed in college, career, and life,” he said in a statement. “However, the approach can only be successful if we have strong business partners involved, who make sure that students are learning about careers and getting hands-on experience that is aligned with industry standards and expectations.”