

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

**CALIFORNIA CAREER PATHWAYS TRUST LEADERS
REFLECT ON TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS THAT SUSTAIN
HIGH-QUALITY PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE AND CAREER**

Over the past three years, JFF has engaged deeply with California Career Pathways Trust (CCPT) consortia through both statewide research and technical assistance in order to understand leaders' approaches to implementing and developing sustainable programs. [JFF's recent research](#) found that the CCPT funds did advance programmatic priorities like developing new pathways and increasing student participation in pathways. However, it also revealed that the initiative's ambitious goals of building regional systems of cross-sector partners that would sustain and expand pathways after the grant period went largely unrealized. Specifically, leaders in many regions found it difficult to develop sustainable partnerships because the grant period was relatively short, and because they encountered early challenges that hindered cross-sector collaboration.

But in interactions with various CCPT consortia around the state, JFF researchers did observe some regions with leaders who were thinking about and approaching the CCPT opportunity differently, in ways that had the potential to lead to outcomes that would be more sustainable in the long run. Those leaders were experimenting with unique approaches to partnership development, investing in regional infrastructure (e.g. structures, routines, relationships, partnership norms), and testing new models of leadership.



BUILDING A
FUTURE
THAT WORKS

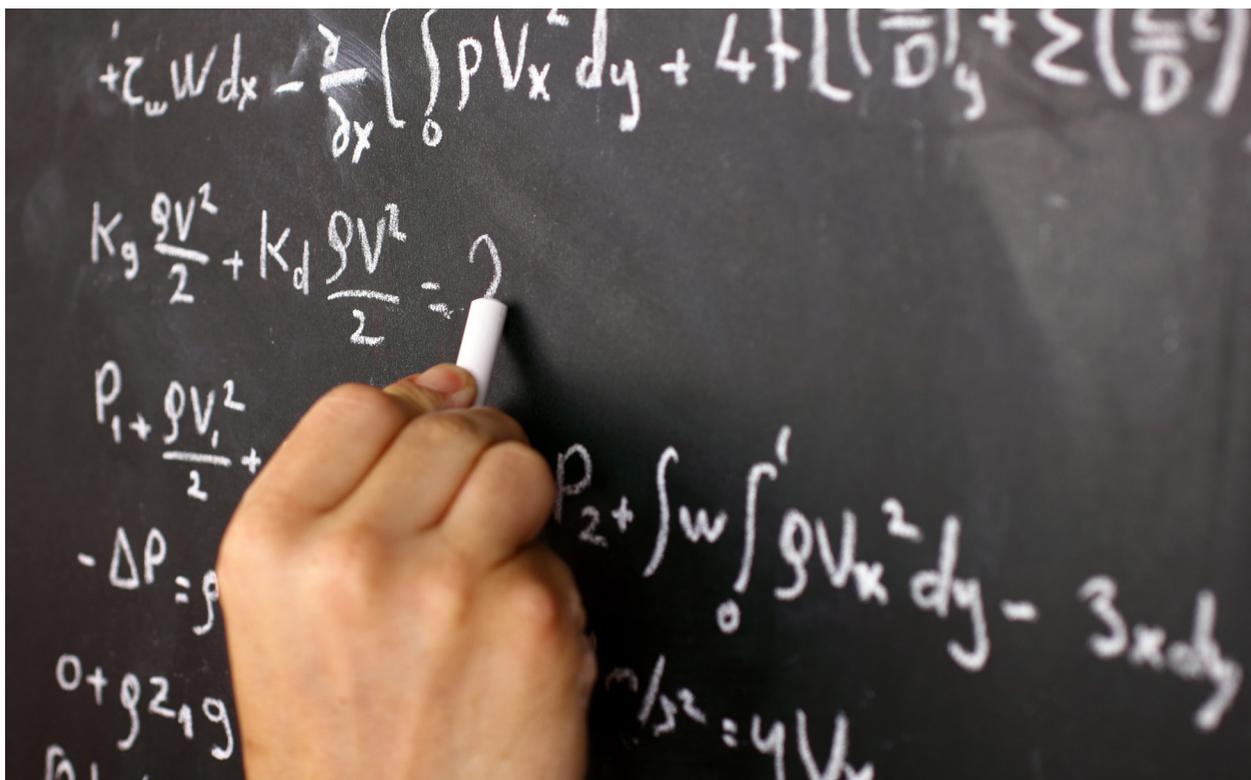
AUTHOR

Renée Faulkner
Senior Program Manager, JFF

In this final installment in a series of three briefs about the CCPT grant program, the leaders of four CCPT consortia—the Fresno Unified School District, the Los Angeles High Impact Information Technology, Entertainment and Entrepreneurship, and Communications Hubs regional consortium (or LA HI-TECH, led by the Pasadena Area Community College District), the Northern California Career Pathway Alliance (NCCPA, led by the Sonoma County Office of Education), and the Tulare-Kings Pathways Project (Tulare County Office of Education) describe their experiences in leveraging the CCPT opportunity as a vehicle for not only improving career

pathways, but also establishing deep regional collaboratives and transforming the systems that support career pathways.

In sharing these voices, we are not suggesting that these four consortia met all of the goals of CCPT. Indeed, the consortia leaders themselves say they still have plenty of work to do, while offering examples of where their efforts did achieve their intended results. We do hope that the perspectives captured here resonate with other regional leaders and inform the work they are doing to develop approaches for supporting and sustaining collaborative initiatives that promote economic advancement.



START WITH SUSTAINABILITY

Representing a statewide investment of more than \$500 million dollars, CCPT offered an unprecedented opportunity for local leaders to build cross-sector regional consortia in support of college and career pathways. Whereas many CCPT consortia used the infusion of funds to finance investments in expensive equipment or hire much needed staff, the leaders of the consortia highlighted in this report saw the CCPT grant as an opportunity to begin the challenging, long-term work of regional partnership-building, the first step of which was to think creatively about the potential of this type of grant program.¹ Instead of thinking of ways to spend the grant money first, they started by thinking of what would be required to build sustainable programs.

“We saw CCPT as an opportunity for us to redefine what we saw as one-time funding,” a leader from Fresno said. “For us, this meant beginning with sustainability in mind. So we started by looking at how this funding could be leveraged to build systems within our districts and among our partners.”

While most consortia did not frame CCPT goals in terms of systems change and did not spend their funds with an eye toward long-term sustainability, the site leaders

in this sample did approach the CCPT opportunity in ways similar to what the Fresno leader described—with early visioning that emphasized transforming local and regional systems.²

“We used CCPT to start conversations with partners about visioning: What did we want things to be in the end? How did we see that in terms of sustainability? And how could we be doing things differently?” the leader from Fresno continued. “Those were conversations that were richer and deeper than what we’ve had before.”

According to the leaders in this sample, those conversations opened up considerable opportunities for new, cross-sector relationships—an expressed goal of the CCPT initiative.

“[When we were awarded a CCPT grant], all of a sudden there was a lot of excitement about breaking down existing silos and [exploring] integration and connections with other sectors in a seamless way,” said a leader from LA HI-TECH. “CCPT allowed potential for what could be across all sectors.”

BUILD COALITIONS OF THE WILLING

To fulfill the CCPT grant program's goal of developing new career pathways programs through regional action, the CCPT consortia had to take on three significant implementation tasks: changing mindsets about career technical education (CTE), establishing communication among all stakeholders, and building regional infrastructure. For the majority of CCPT consortia, those goals proved too ambitious to achieve within the four-year grant period.³ However, the leaders featured in this report did make progress toward those goals, in part by expanding the notion of "regional partnership." Instead of thinking strictly in geographical terms, with "regional" referring to common geographic boundaries, the leaders of more successful consortia seemed to think of "regional" as more of a conceptual idea referring to a common mission and a shared commitment to collaboration. With that mindset, they built coalitions of willing partners.

"It wasn't just about the region; it really was about the coalition of the willing," said the LA HI-TECH leader. "Pulling together whoever was ready to just dive in and start, and going from there."

A common strategy for building and nurturing coalitions of the willing involved uniting partners around initiatives that already had some momentum.

"The primary tactic was paying attention to who was getting the work done and was excited to do it, then actively engaging them more deeply in all the work," said another leader. "First, you needed to have a critical mass of people doing the same type of work. Once many people were working toward the same goals, you could start to see the potential for an authentic regional collaborative, and from there you could start to build the infrastructure to support it."

In the NCCPA, a consortium made up of several northern California counties, leaders promoted a compelling regional economic development imperative to bring together a coalition of willing partners and create a macro-regional vision. "We focused our efforts on a regional basis around economic development and industry sectors that are in need in our region," said an NCCPA leader. "That drove some discussion around how we addressed the various industry sectors together. It made sure we were all paying attention to the same economic drivers as a region as opposed to our just in our home counties. We were focused on an economic region. It forced collaboration around industry sectors and needs, not counties and programs."

But these leaders were quick to note that coalition-building was not without its challenges, especially when it came to managing complex power dynamics. “A little bit of money opened the door and gave us more leverage with partners than we had before,” the leader from Fresno said. “But getting a lot of money can bring people to the table for the wrong reasons.”

In building partnerships, leaders were immediately challenged with managing issues of money, power, and control. “People wanted to have more control than not. And there was a perception that the people who had the money had the power in the relationship,” explained the LA HI-TECH leader.

Some CCPT consortia managed that tension by simply sub-granting funds to school districts and community colleges to implement career pathways programs on their own.⁴ The leaders profiled here, on the other hand, leaned into the tension by elevating the regional priority. “Districts wanted to know about money and were concerned about how much money they were going to get. But we knew we wanted to use this effort to shift from building capacity in a district to building capacity of the region,” said a leader of the Tulare-Kings Pathways Project. “We had to work deliberately to help people understand that this was about more than a few dollars. There was a bigger picture, a bigger purpose.”

The partners involved in the Fresno Unified School District “created a space, a real grassroots effort, to talk about what our community should be doing together to solve schools’ needs. It forced people to decide where their beliefs and priorities were about this work,” said the Fresno leader.

Bringing partners and stakeholders together to create a common vision and mutually set goals diffused some of the power struggles. Such efforts helped partners see they were working toward the same regional outcomes. As one leader of the NCCPA put it, “We learned that we had more things in common than we actually thought.”



CO-CREATE STRUCTURES FOR REGIONAL ACTION

Developing regional infrastructures was another common priority among the consortia featured in this report. Whereas most CCPT grantees adopted traditional, top-down hierarchical organizational structures with partnerships governed by memoranda of understanding, the leaders in this sample emphasized openness, transparency, making connections, and sharing control as key elements of efforts to mobilize collective action on a regional scale.⁵ For them, that meant deliberately connecting practitioners from secondary education, postsecondary education, the workforce, and industry so they could share knowledge, coordinate resources, and ultimately create a sustainable regional infrastructure for growing career pathways.

The leader from the Tulare-Kings consortium described an infrastructure-building process wherein leaders and practitioners from all levels convened within and across job functions to tackle problems and learn new skills. “We built infrastructure with all levels of our organizations. With owners of companies, with community college deans, and in K-12 we built a lot of capacity with our [Linked Learning] directors,” she said. In addition to executive level leaders, practitioners from all three segments (K-12, community

college, and workforce development) participated in workgroups designed for problem-solving and communities of practice focused on peer learning. “We built an infrastructure to create a system of coherence,” she said.

In the Los Angeles area, leaders worked to build a regional infrastructure that created opportunities for new partners that had not previously had clear entry points to the network. “The tech industry is a relatively young industry [in our region], and they didn’t have built-in infrastructure for engagement with schools or colleges for internships or job shadowing,” said the LA HI-TECH leader. “They had none of that in place the way other sectors like health care did, so we were all on the ground level with this.”

The new infrastructure included a streamlined process for communicating between schools and employers and the development of a work-based learning intermediary. With those systems in place, regional leaders were able to engage new employer partners and also change perceptions about the growing talent pool in the region. “In effect, these partnerships have changed the way the tech industry hires in this region. It’s changed the whole way that they see our students. Now they’re looking at our students in a bigger

way, and looking at them as valuable and contributing potential employees,” the LA HI-TECH leader explained.

In any environment, leaders explained, building sustainable infrastructure and fostering a spirit of regionalism requires trust.

“In a collaborative, you can’t tell people what to do. You can’t mandate one thing. It’s all based on trust and a desire to work, share, and learn together,” one leader said.

“Conversations don’t require money,” another leader added. “Building relationships doesn’t always require money. But [relationships] do require trust and a willingness to step outside of your comfort zone.”

Building that trust, leaders said, started with consistent communication. “It was important that we spent time translating and aligning language,” the Tulare-Kings leader reported. “Once people could see that they were talking about the same things, that they were on the same page, they were more inclined to want to work together.”



CHANGE SYSTEMS TO ENSURE **SUSTAINABILITY**

The implementation research revealed that grantees that approached the CCPT opportunity from a systems-change perspective, rather than looking at it from a program implementation point of view, experienced a greater level of transformation, and that transformation supported post-grant sustainability.⁶

To better understand the concept of systems change, we referred consortia leaders to a 2003 report by the Corporation for Supportive Housing titled “Laying a New Foundation: Changing the Systems That Create and Sustain Supportive Housing” which argues that a “real change in a system is one in which people habitually do the new thing, using resources, authority, technology, and ideas that are routinely associated with the new activity.”⁷ We encouraged leaders to think about systems change from that perspective and create an environment in which a sense of partnership, a shared commitment to capacity-building, and a shared experience of value compels stakeholders to habitually use resources, authority, technology, and ideas that are routinely associated with the desired results. In other words, systems change is people change.

As one regional leader observed, some people “thought this grant would just

be about pathways, but it’s really about changing the culture of people in our organizations—how they think, and how they work together.”

In their efforts to change culture, these leaders ultimately experienced a number of systemic changes. In one region, school districts each made considerable, ongoing financial commitments to collaboratively continue CCPT activity and fill the funding gap after the grant period ended. In another, hiring practices have shifted such that all administrator-level job candidates must interview with a cross-sector hiring panel and explain their understanding of regional collaboration. In most of the regions, the collaborative, cross-sector practices introduced through CCPT are now embedded in day-to-day work across departments and institutions.

“Everyone’s working together better now,” one leader said. “[High schools] aren’t waiting for community colleges to call them back. No one is out begging employers for internships anymore. There are systems in place that help us get all this done.”

Perhaps one of the most telling signs that these consortia have brought about systemic change is the extent to which stakeholders’ perceptions have changed.

“One of the unintended impacts is the change in perspective of those who are doing the work,” said one of the NCCPA leaders. “Teachers and principals and line staff talk about and think about this work differently. CTE is no longer thought of as the ‘other’ program, the option for those kids who aren’t going to college.”

As the leader from the Tulare-Kings initiative aptly reflected, “Sustainability is the result of systems change.”

These leaders agreed that, thanks to their up-front efforts to transform the existing systems of career pathways implementation, they are now reaping benefits in the form of streamlined communication within and across institutions, new cross-sector leadership, and improved processes and protocols—and they expect all of those improvements to continue beyond the end of the grant period.

Another benefit is that the changes support more efficient cross-sector data sharing, the development of common regional metrics, and the implementation of higher quality work-based learning opportunities and dual-enrollment programs. “We don’t see any reason why we couldn’t continue,” said one leader from the NCCPA. “Now that the systems are in place and people know their roles and the governance teams are seeing how valuable it all is, they want

to keep it going.” Some of these leaders noted that now that they have laid the groundwork for coordinating partners and resources, they are in a better position to compete for other grant funding that may become available.

While all of these leaders spoke about the importance of systems-change work, they also agreed that systemic change doesn’t happen in just four years. All of the leaders featured in this report agreed that the four-year CCPT grant period did not allow sufficient time for making the deep transformations that they sought. “Systems change is a long-term process, and in some ways we’re really just getting things started,” said a leader from the Tulare-Kings consortium.

The leaders said that any future state-funded grant programs should take into account the time and energy required to bring partners together, shift mindsets, and change systems. They suggested taking the pressure off grantees by, perhaps, adding a planning period to the grant timeline or offering funding for technical assistance and other supports. “If you really want to make substantive change, then you really have to give enough time for change partners to really come together and go deep,” the leader from Fresno said. “But that takes time. It sometimes takes a whole year.”

DIFFERENT OUTCOMES REQUIRE DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

The leaders said that working on the CCPT grant programs taught them three major lessons that could benefit others faced with similar opportunities and challenges.

The first lesson, they said, is that leaders have to be willing to take risks if they want to implement systemic change. Working on the CCPT initiative “couldn’t be business as usual,” said the leader from the Tulare-Kings consortium. “If we wanted different outcomes for students, we were going to have to take some risks, try some new ways of doing things, even if people didn’t totally trust the direction right away.” Taking risks, especially with millions of dollars on the line, can be daunting, but these leaders said the chance of ensuring better outcomes far outweighed the risk of failure.



Second, they said that leaders must be open to considering new approaches to leadership in order to take full advantage of opportunities like the CCPT grant program. Some of them noted that the skills needed to lead a collaborative partnership and drive systemic change were counterintuitive to the leadership habits they had developed during their careers. For example, they said that they learned to build cross-sector networks by behaving more like coaches than program directors, being willing to defer to other leaders and

organizations at times when doing so would benefit the overall mission, and learning to walk alongside their fellow leaders and recognize that they were all mutual learners in the CCPT experience. They also suggested that it is important to help others develop those capacities and build tight onboarding programs so that new regional leaders can join the team without disrupting the systems in place.

Third, they said that leaders who want to drive systemic change must prioritize experimentation and learning. They said

that they embraced the developmental nature of the work and recognized that the learning process and program implementation were equally important indicators of progress. The leaders said that, in some cases, they focused less on program outputs and data reporting and more on trying new strategies for collaboration and networking—however ambiguous the outcomes might have been. In doing so, they cultivated a culture of learning that set the stage for continued regional collaboration.

By most accounts, the CCPT grant program had a considerable impact on the college and career pathways movement in California. With the grant money, most of the consortia were able to build new cross-sector partnerships and advance pathways in their regions. But while most of the partnerships find themselves scaling back their CCPT efforts now that the funding has expired, a select few are reaping the benefits of their up-front efforts at intentionally building infrastructures and transforming systems.

By strategically positioning the CCPT opportunity as a vehicle for instituting long-term systemic change, the consortia highlighted in this report have created sustainable collaboration models, the outcomes of which will benefit their regions well beyond the grant period.



ENDNOTES

- 1 M. McLaughlin, “The California Career Pathways Trust: Cohort One Accomplishments and Long-Term Prospects,” JFF, November 2018.
- 2 M. McLaughlin, “The California Career Pathways Trust: Cohort One Accomplishments and Long-Term Prospects,” JFF, November 2018.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 M. McLaughlin, V. Lundy-Wagner, and B. Groves, “Two Years Into CCPT: Many Challenges and Great Promise,” JFF, March 2017.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 M. McLaughlin, “The California Career Pathways Trust: Cohort One Accomplishments and Long-Term Prospects,” JFF, November 2018.
- 7 D. Grieff, T. Proscio, and C. Wilkins, “Laying a New Foundation: Changing the Systems That Create and Sustain Supportive Housing,” Corporation for Supportive Housing, July 2003.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was made possible through generous support from the Stuart Foundation and the Noyce Foundation. JFF would like to thank Anita Dharapuram, Gina Dickson, Sally Fowler, Stephen Jackson, and Joy Soares and John Snavely for their contributions to this report. We are appreciative of JFF colleagues including Marty Alvarado, Joel Vargas and the JFF Communications team and copy-editors for their support in the production of this brief.

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. Join us as we build a future that works. www.jff.org.



88 Broad St., 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110

122 C St., NW, Suite 280, Washington, DC 20001

505 14th St., Suite 340, Oakland, CA 94612

TEL 617.728.4446 **WEB** www.jff.org