


# Empowering the Intersegmental Agenda: Opportunities for Research, Policy, and Practice

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Due to fragmented and misaligned segments of public education, many students lack access to educational opportunities that will ensure their success in college and career. This problem is one that may only be solved through better alignment and coordination between high school and college, between systems of higher education, and between education and economic development sectors. Intersegmental collaborations are emerging as a key lever for change, and the sustainability of these intersegmental efforts both depend on and offer opportunities to bridge research, policy, and practice in ways that facilitate improved outcomes. This brief summarizes lessons for effective collaboration and highlights opportunities for bridging research, policy, and practice to increase student success in college and career.



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.



Now more than ever before, a college degree is key to economic prosperity and the health and well-being of individuals and society at large. Yet, far too many young people fail to complete college. The reasons for low college completion rates stem in large part from fragmented and misaligned segments of public education, where students are insufficiently prepared for subsequent stages of learning. To address the fragmentation and misalignment, education leaders are collaborating to devote greater attention to the important transitions students make as they navigate their path towards degree attainment and gainful employment.

Intersegmental partnerships are emerging as levers for improving student outcomes through better alignment between high school and college, between systems of higher education, and between education and economic development sectors. While limited research indicates a positive impact of the partnerships,<sup>1</sup> there is much work yet to be done to ensure that effective outcomes result from these partnerships. Beyond lessons for the development and scaling of intersegmental partnerships, as addressed in previous PACE reports,<sup>2</sup> opportunities exist to connect the work of education and community leaders with policy and research. This brief draws on the expertise of scholars and advocates, steeped in experience with intersegmental collaboration, to offer lessons for effective collaboration and opportunities for bridging research, policy, and practice. Specifically, this brief summarizes three presentations about advancing intersegmental efforts from a panel organized and facilitated by Michal Kurlaender of University of California, Davis at the PACE 2019 Conference held in Sacramento on February 1, 2019.

## **Broken Educational Systems Underserving California Youth**

An educated and skilled citizenry is critical to the economic stability and the democratic principles of our society. Yet, not all students have access to educational systems that will ensure their success. Nearly 60 percent of four-year-olds nationwide are not enrolled in publicly funded preschools.<sup>3</sup> In California, only 83 percent of students who start high school graduate four years later.<sup>4</sup> About two thirds of high school students enroll in college after graduation,<sup>5</sup> but less than half complete a two- or four-year degree.<sup>6</sup> The lack of college completion is even more alarming for low-income and historically underrepresented students, where students are half as likely to earn a college degree.<sup>7</sup>

At the 2019 PACE Conference, panelist Cecilia Rios-Aguilar emphasized that our educational systems are failing many youth. Referring to a 2010 article by researchers Deli-Amen and DeLuca,<sup>8</sup> Rios-Aguilar described the “Underserved Third”—the population of high school students who are neither ready for college nor enrolled in a formal career preparation program. By 2018, the proportion of students structurally positioned to fail in college and career had grown to nearly one half of all high school students.<sup>9</sup> The systemic challenges for many students continue in higher education. In fact, Rios-Aguilar suggests the “Underserved Half” will most likely become what the William T. Grant Foundation describes as the “New Forgotten Half”—students attending community college, accumulating credits, but leaving with no degree or certification.<sup>10</sup>

The dismal college completion rates, especially for low-income and underserved students, are the result of structural barriers and systemic failures. For instance, while we know the importance of quality schooling for young children,<sup>11</sup> the disconnect between preschool and elementary schools often slows learning.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, high school students do not have equal opportunities for the rigorous academic preparation necessary for college. In fact, schools serving a student body comprised largely of low-income students offer fewer advanced courses than schools serving more affluent students.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, how K–12 systems define college readiness is not necessarily aligned with the demands of two- and four-year colleges. This lack of alignment often results in remediation and a longer time to achieve a degree for students who enroll in college. The lack of alignment and coordination between the various levels of education go far beyond these simple examples. And, unfortunately, the systems as *designed* result in the outcomes that we must improve.

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**“ We are producing students who are structurally positioned to fail. These are people. There are lives at stake here... and mostly students of color, low-income students of color. The idea of [intersegmental collaboration] appeals to me, IF we think of the [challenges] as structures and systems, not as students failing themselves.”**

CECILIA RIOS-AGUILAR, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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## Repairing the Systems Through Intersegmental Collaboration

In the face of staggering gaps in educational opportunity, achievement, and attainment, efforts to improve the educational structures and systems that serve our youth are imperative. Increasingly, partnerships between educational sectors and community organizations (i.e., K–12 districts, community colleges, public 4-year colleges) aim to improve educational attainment and employability for all students, and decrease disparities between subgroups of students.<sup>14</sup> These intersegmental partnerships are emerging at the state, regional, and local levels. For example, the California state legislature appropriated \$500 million under the Career Pathways Trust program to incentivize K–12 public school districts and community colleges to develop regional and local partnerships working to expand career technical education pathways. Local intersegmental partnerships also emerge from grassroots efforts to improve student outcomes. For example, the African American Regional Educational Alliance (AAREA), a community-based organization established in 2003 in Alameda County, works to improve the academic performance and college readiness of African American high school students through collaborative work with school and district leaders, as well as local four-year public and private colleges.<sup>15</sup>

While rigorous research indicates that K–12 and higher education partnerships are positively impacting high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates,<sup>16</sup> success is not guaranteed. Elisha Smith Arrillaga of The Education Trust-West asserts that realization of improved outcomes through intersegmental collaboration requires an unwavering equity focus and community engagement. Similarly, Joel Vargas of JFF outlines a set of cognitive shifts, competencies, and conditions necessary for successful and sustainable intersegmental partnerships.

To support meaningful and sustainable intersegmental collaboration requires a cognitive shift in the way policy-makers and education leaders think about the system and the work. First, leaders must shift from a focus on initiatives to a focus on sustaining transformation. According to Vargas, transformative systems change is mission-oriented and aimed at solving problems that may only be solved through coordination of multiple sectors. This shift involves listening to student voice and grounding conversations in data and efforts.

Systems change and sustained transformation demands effective leaders. In their support of intersegmental collaboration, JFF points to the nine characteristics of

effective systems leaders developed by Harder+Company and Equal Measure.<sup>17</sup> The characteristics of leaders include ways of working, skills, and dispositions. First, effective leaders empower the collective organization rather than individuals, create opportunities for individuals to contribute and see the benefit of their participation, and work collaboratively with partners and stakeholders. Effective leaders are skilled at building relationships and trust among actors in the system, communicating and focusing on results. Moreover, aligned with the cognitive shift described above, effective leaders view their work through a systems lens where they understand complexity while keeping the big picture in focus. Finally, effective leaders have an open mind and a steadfast commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This last set of competencies was echoed by all the panelists, with Elisha Smith Arrillaga insisting that meaningful intersegmental work must be equity-centered.

Drawing on JFF's work with California Career Pathways Trust partnerships, Vargas described the state conditions that support intersegmental collaboration. These conditions include investment in the development of leadership capacity at the state, regional, and local levels. In addition, he suggests that in order to support systems change and sustained transformation, state policy-makers and leaders have a responsibility to reduce the number of competing initiatives. Finally, states should capitalize on momentum, use emerging funds to support the ongoing collaboration, and provide continuity of support through a state-level leadership team.

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**“ We’ve learned that advancing intersegmental collaboration is about not only a set of conditions, but also competencies and cognitive shifts.”**

JOEL VARGAS, JFF

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## Intersegmental Collaboration: Opportunities for Research-Policy-Practice

Just as meaningful intersegmental collaboration entails transformative leadership and a focus on sustainable coordination of multiple education and community agencies, it also demands coordination of research, policy, and practice.

The power of bridging research, policy, and practice is reflected in three principles outlined by Education Trust-West:

1. **Engage students and communities early and often**

Efforts to improve outcomes should begin with community engagement. Community stakeholders and students together may examine data and ask questions to understand the educational trajectories, challenges, and successes of local students. Drawing on the trends observed in the data, constituents can work together to design programs for sustainable change. Most importantly, this process builds trust between members of partner organizations and their stakeholders, which enhances and sustains collaboration.

2. **Develop research-based materials for advocates**

Sustained collaboration across organizations often depends on effective advocacy. Advocates lobby for the necessary political conditions, seek funding, and build community support. In order to do so, they need evidence of both the problem that intersegmental partnerships are trying to solve and the impact of collaborative efforts. Quality research can provide this evidence.

3. **Highlight promising partnership examples**

Along with evidence of impact, research should highlight promising intersegmental partnerships. This recognizes successful efforts in cross-organization collaboration, provides illustrations of the evidence for policy-makers and advocates, and supplies examples for community leaders in other communities embarking on intersegmental coordination. Several recent publications have described exemplary partnerships and their practices. (See the Related Publications section at the end of this brief.)

Currently, many opportunities exist to further connect research, policy, and practice. Cecilia Rios-Aguilar suggests that recent state policies to allocate K–12 and community college funding in a manner that accounts for the higher cost of educating low-income and high needs students need to be investigated. Both the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) implemented in 2014–2015 for K–12 public school districts and the Student Centered Funding Formula to be implemented in 2018–2019 for California community colleges are equity-focused. Both policies have the potential to decrease disparities in educational attainment. Yet, research is needed to see if the investments pay off. Specifically, research needs to investigate whether funds intended to support low-income, English language learners, and homeless and foster youth are actually serving the intended students and the impact of the funding shift for students. Moreover, within an intersegmental context, lessons learned from one program should inform the

implementation and evaluation of the other with the aim of aligning systems to better serve the youth of California.

Another area for bridging research, policy, and practice to support intersegmental collaboration is through data sharing. California currently has no longitudinal student-level data system allowing education segments (i.e., K–12 and higher education) to easily track students' individual trajectories. With the lack of a statewide data system, local efforts to share data between organizations have grown in recent years. Yet, the need for a statewide data platform is abundantly evident to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike. As expressed in various forums in the past year,<sup>18</sup> an effective platform would promote efficiency in merging data across segments and provide invaluable information to multiple stakeholders about students' educational achievement and attainment in a way that facilitates improved outcomes.

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**“It is imperative that equity is at the center of all of our work. I urge us to think about those students who don’t at first come to mind when we think of preparing students for college. All students equally deserve the opportunity to move between the systems.”**

ELISHA SMITH ARRILLAGA, THE EDUCATION TRUST-WEST

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## Conclusion

In an environment of fractured and misaligned systems leading to unacceptable education attainment outcomes for California students, intersegmental partnerships may provide an avenue for improvement. Indeed, there is evidence of the positive impact of intersegmental collaboration. Yet, meaningful collaboration calls for a supportive statewide policy context, competent leaders, and a commitment to equity. Moreover, research, policy, and practice must work in tandem to promote and enhance intersegmental efforts. The growth in intersegmental initiatives and shifting state policies teem with opportunities to learn from practice, evaluate efforts, apply lessons learned from previous practice and prior research, and inform policy going forward. Only with a clear bridge between research, policy, and practice will education and community segments become more aligned and coordinated, thus enabling students to thrive in a system designed to meet their diverse needs.



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- Lee, P., Reed, S., Hernandez, A., & Kurlaender, M. (2018). *Intersegmental data partnership resource guide*. Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.
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- <sup>5</sup> Kurlaender, M., Reed, S., Cohen, K., Naven, M., Martorell, P., & Carrell, S. (2018). *Where California high school students attend college*. Palo Alto, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education.
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- <sup>7</sup> Calculated by author using college enrollment numbers reported in Kurlaender et al., 2018, and reported graduation rates from University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges.
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- <sup>11</sup> Stipek, D. (2018, September). Early childhood education in California. *Getting Down to Facts II*. Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.
- <sup>12</sup> Coburn, C. Friedmann, E., & Stipek, D. (2018, November). *Fostering Pre-K to elementary alignment and continuity in mathematics in urban school districts: Challenges and possibilities*. PACE Continuous Improvement Brief. Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.
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## Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

Founded in 1983, PACE

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- Publishes policy briefs, research reports, and working papers that address key policy issues in California's education system.
  - Convenes seminars and briefings that make current research accessible to policy audiences throughout California.
  - Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences.
  - Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.

### Related Publications

Sherrie Reed, Patrick Lee, Michal Kurlaender, & Ambar Hernandez. **Intersegmental Partnerships and Data Sharing: Promising Practices From the Field.** Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. July 2018.

Patrick Lee, Sherrie Reed, Ambar Hernandez, & Michal Kurlaender. **Intersegmental Data Partnerships Resource Guide.** Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.

Elizabeth Friedmann. **Building Intersegmental Partnerships.** Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. June 2017.

Cynthia E. Coburn, Kelly McMahon, Graciela Borsato, Abigail Stein, Natalie Jou, Seenae Chong, Rebekah LeMahieu, Megan Franke, Sonia Ibarra, & Deborah Stipek. **Fostering Pre-K to Elementary Alignment and Continuity in Mathematics in Urban School Districts: Challenges and Possibilities.** Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. December 2018.



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