



# Adult Learner Transitions to Postsecondary Education: Adult School and Community College Collaborations

A Promising Practice Brief

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## Introduction

For millions of California adults with limited English proficiency or without a high school diploma,<sup>1</sup> the California Adult Education Program (CAEP) offers an opportunity to improve basic skills and literacy.<sup>2</sup> These foundational skills courses can also lay the groundwork for further postsecondary and occupational training, providing the opportunity for students to attain college credentials, earn higher wages, and become upwardly mobile. Decades of research demonstrate that students with postsecondary credentials have higher earnings and better employment outcomes than students with only basic skills training or a high school diploma (Kim & Tamborini, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Yet, we know little about the institutional practices that support students' transition from basic skills and literacy to occupational and postsecondary education. What are effective transition practices, and how are they carried out by adult school providers?

To better understand how students successfully transition, a team of WestEd researchers from the Center on Economic Mobility interviewed key staff from noncredit community colleges and K-12 adult education programs funded by CAEP. We discovered that collaboration was an essential practice in supporting students' transition out of adult education. Collaboration took place between adult education providers, with postsecondary institutions, and within the regional consortia established by CAEP. Providers collaborated through meeting and developing collective expertise and sharing staff positions, policies, and programs across providers and institutions. We found that collaboration improved policies and programs at adult education campuses, and providers reported that these strategies led to more effective transitions.

In this brief, we begin by discussing the context for adult education collaborations in California and reviewing evidence-based strategies for effective collaboration. We then present four collaboration strategies shared among

the adult education providers and suggest recommendations for program improvement.

## Context: Adult Education Consortia in California

The California Adult Education Program (CAEP) funds non-credit community college and K-12 adult education in California. The legislation that established CAEP (AB 104) also created a structure of 71 regional consortia divided along the boundaries of community college district service areas (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2016). Formal membership in a consortium is limited to K-12 and community college districts, county offices of education (COEs), and joint powers agencies (JPAs), though consortia also include partner agencies such as community-based organizations, libraries, workforce agencies, and correctional facilities.<sup>3</sup> All 72 community college districts and nearly 300 K-12 school districts participate in regional consortia across the state.<sup>4</sup>

The established consortium structure represented a shift in state policy and played an important role in facilitating collaborative relationships. Prior to 2014, most California community colleges had "little or no relationship with adult education providers in their area" (Seymour, 2009, p. 6). However, since the consortia were established, school districts, county offices of education, and community college districts plan a regional delivery approach by documenting existing services, identifying unmet needs, and developing regional plans to coordinate and deliver adult education throughout the region. Consortia are awarded state funds that they can use across adult education instructional areas (including basic skills, workforce preparation, and pre-apprenticeship). This structure intends to promote collaboration between adult education providers and partner agencies by coordinating and integrating existing adult education programs to improve student success (Taylor, 2015).

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1. Author's calculations using 2021 American Community Survey one-year estimates. See also the Migration Policy Institute's [State Immigration Data Profile of California](#) (2021).
  2. The California Adult Education Program (CAEP), established through Assembly Bill 86, provides resources "to rethink and redesign an educational system that creates seamless transitions for students across adult schools and community colleges to accelerate academic and career success in order to earn a living wage." CAEP provides adult education state funding to providers of adult education, including regional consortia, county offices of education, school districts, and community colleges.
  3. For a description of consortia members, see the Legislative Analyst's Office's [Adult Education Consortium Tracker](#) (n.d.).
  4. For a list of consortia members, see the [California Adult Education Consortium Directory](#) (2023).

## Research on Collaboration

Over the last two decades, researchers and practitioners have called for greater collaboration between adult education providers and other institutions to increase the transition rate of students into postsecondary education (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2005; Duke-Benfield & Strawn, 2008; Seymour, 2009). While community colleges and adult education programs were once seen as providing separate services—one serving students who need noncredit, remedial, and basic skills courses and the other providing credentials, academic credit, and transfer into careers—there is a growing acknowledgment of the interdependence of both systems. Colleges rely on adult education programs to prepare well-qualified students with high school credentials. And adult education programs need the credentials awarded by colleges to help their students be upwardly mobile (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2005). Both systems need to work together to meet their shared goal of increasing the number of low-skilled adults who earn living wages.

In a literature review of promising practices, Seymour (2009) found that collaboration was a central organizational and administrative practice for transitioning students from adult to postsecondary education. She outlines several best practices for collaboration. Assigning the same administrator to supervise adult education and noncredit basic skills education at the community college was an effective collaboration practice, according to a survey of college presidents (Boylan, 2004). Hiring staff to serve as counselors, manage referral systems, and provide liaison services is a recognized best practice (Seymour, 2009). Finally, community colleges must form collaborative arrangements with adult education providers, which include sharing faculty, staff, and support services, creating jointly administered programs, and establishing mutual expectations about the course and program requirements (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2005). A summary of some best practices related to collaboration is outlined in Figure 1. The following section discusses findings about how adult education providers in California have initiated collaboration.

### Figure 1: Best Practices for Collaboration (Seymour, 2009)

- Deep relationships with college administrators who can advocate for students
- Partnerships formed over time and characterized by a high degree of coordination
- Knowledgeable and resourceful program staff
- Shared faculty, staff, and support services
- Creating jointly administered programs
- Establishing mutual expectations about the requirements for college entry
- A systematic and structured transition program

## Promising Practices for Collaboration

Through analysis of the interviews, the WestEd team identified four primary strategies for collaboration used by adult education and college partners:<sup>5</sup> (1) sharing knowledge at regular consortium meetings, (2) making referrals between adult education programs, (3) sharing student support staff and programming, and (4) streamlining transitions to community college campuses. Partnerships had many benefits, including sharing resources, exposing adult education students to postsecondary content and culture, and building awareness of the process of transitioning from adult education to college.

### Building Shared Knowledge

Consortia encourage community colleges to create relationships with adult education providers and offer a structure for meeting regularly; most interviewees reported weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly meetings with their consortium.

5. In this brief, we use the terms adult education providers, programs, and schools interchangeably. Adult education programs are offered through either K-12 adult schools or community college noncredit adult programs.

The consortia meetings took different forms across the providers. One provider described using regular consortium meetings to problem solve, share effective strategies, get new ideas, and bring ideas from other institutions back to their campuses. Another shared how consortium meetings were useful for talking through challenges and identifying gaps in service delivery. Consortium meetings were sometimes used to provide professional development. One small K-12 adult school provider in the San Diego/Imperial region described how the consortium convened teachers at the beginning of the academic year to touch base on current practices, changes in the systems, and reconnect before the start of the school year. Finally, providers used consortium meetings to talk about best practices for collecting data and tracking student transitions. One large K-12 adult school provider in the Central Valley described using consortium meetings to better understand the movement of students between adult schools and college using administrative data.

Consortia meetings allowed providers to learn about initiatives across the region. This new knowledge led to programmatic changes and improvements that providers believed supported the transition process for adult learners. The Central Valley provider also described how the consortium meetings were useful because they look for where providers are duplicating services and where providers can grow services in a region. For example, through the consortium meetings, they learned that enrollment in the community college vocational nursing program was impacted and had a lottery for program admissions. They developed the solution to stagger program start dates for vocational classes so the community college would have a consistent stream of applicants from the adult school.

In these ways, providers saw consortia as an important and valued tool for collaboration through regular communication, sharing effective practices, and using that knowledge to inspire program improvements.

### Referrals Between Adult Education Programs

Providers used the shared knowledge of regional programs they developed through consortia meetings to make referrals between adult education programs in their region. These referral processes to neighboring adult schools were especially effective for consortia that covered a smaller

geographic area. Providers would recommend programs from another campus when that program was not offered on their own campus. For example, the small K-12 San Diego/Imperial region provider referred students to another adult school for citizenship courses. Another midsize adult school program in the Los Angeles/Orange County (LA/OC) region described how they developed a list of local programs based on program availability, length, and geography at their consortium meetings. This program list was shared with students who were interested in programs not offered by the provider, such as medical assisting. Adult schools collaborated with each other to direct students to programs at neighboring schools.

### Shared Student Support Staff, Faculty, and Programming

Providers collaborated by sharing student support staff across campuses. In some regions, the consortium established a transition specialist position (also called outreach specialist, navigator, and transition liaison) to facilitate student transitions (Mollica & Simon, 2017). The staff person in this role works across campuses to help students progress toward their goals after completing basic skills and literacy courses.

Some consortia created a position for a student success specialist focused solely on supporting adult school students in the region. The small San Diego/Imperial K-12 adult school provider explained how the specialist is housed at the local community college and is part of the consortium, so students from the adult school program are familiar with the staff members and feel comfortable reaching out to them. The specialist sits one-on-one with students and their families to create customized plans based on their future work and educational goals and also delivers presentations about financial aid, resume writing, applying to college, and job interviews with institutions in the consortium. The provider described the student success specialist as “one of the greatest investments that they have made.”

Providers collaborated by sharing support staff between adult education and community college campuses. At one mid-size community college noncredit adult education program in the Bay Area, counselors from the community college had dedicated release time funded by the consortium to conduct in-person outreach on the adult school campus. The school designated a particular day of the week when the counselor

was on the adult school campus and available to meet with students, rather than simply coming for a one-off visit to the adult school. The provider described how the counselor became a “familiar face” to students and was able to get to know the community well. This collaborative counseling position helped students feel more comfortable with the transition from the adult school to the community college.

Adult schools also collaborated with community colleges by sharing faculty. One large community college noncredit adult education provider in LA/OC used the strategy of faculty co-teaching, supporting faculty to teach at both the adult education and community college campus. A faculty member from the community college culinary program also teaches an ESL class focused on language in the kitchen for adult learners. These shared positions are a form of collaboration that helps to ease the transition out of adult education by exposing students to the same faculty members across programs.

To facilitate this sharing of staff, faculty, and other resources that create continuity for students in their transition to postsecondary, providers also collaborated on shared funding of these initiatives. These strategies of retaining funds at the consortium level for joint activities—such as funding transition specialists and co-counselors—have been documented in other studies as a way to address unmet needs and budget constraints (Mollica & Simon, 2017).

### Systematic and Structured Transition Programs

Finally, providers relied on collaborations with community colleges to streamline the transition from basic skills and literacy courses to community college courses. Providers developed systematic and structured transition programs as a result of their collaboration. One midsize, K-12 adult school provider in the Inland Empire/Desert region conducted a “College 101” workshop for students who are preparing to exit ESL courses in collaboration with their local community college. Another large community college noncredit adult education provider in the Bay Area has a referral system with their local adult school campus. The community college gets students’ information from the adult school and has a specialist call the student to help them navigate the postsecondary system, including the college application process,

course scheduling, and registration. The collaboration promotes an effective transition to the community college for adult education students.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Transitioning out of adult education into postsecondary or career courses is essential for ensuring that more adults earn higher wages and become upwardly mobile. What can adult education providers do to increase the number of adults who transition from adult schools to postsecondary and career pathways? Through interviews with adult school providers, we set out to uncover shared practices among providers who transition a large share of students into postsecondary and CTE pathways.

We found extensive and creative collaboration was a common practice. Collaboration occurred at multiple levels. We documented provider collaboration, such as when providers made referrals to neighboring adult schools, and collaboration between adult schools and colleges, such as CTE faculty co-teaching a basic skills course. Consortia were one key mechanism through which providers collaborated with each other, providing opportunities for interested parties to connect. We outline four consortium collaborative practices that providers attribute to their success: meeting regularly with consortium members, referring students to neighboring adult education programs, sharing programs and staff such as co-teaching and co-counseling, and creating systematic programs to structure the transition to postsecondary. These practices led to the development of innovative policy and programmatic changes.

Nearly all interviewees described their consortium as an effective environment for collaboration. However, a few providers reported that they did not collaborate with their consortium or did not see the collaborations as effective because there was a culture of competition for student enrollment (and funding) between the members. Other studies have also found that there are barriers to collaboration when organizations also have competing or overlapping missions (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2009). Interviewees noted that consortia could improve collaboration by defining who will offer what courses/services within the region.

We recommend the following implementation strategies for other systems and institutions to promote collaboration.

**Create structures for collaboration.** Consortia are an effective way to share resources and encourage collaboration between providers and other interested parties in a region. Creating a consortia or collaborative task force representing all the interested parties from local institutions is one state-level policy initiative that encourages collaboration.

**Designate staff positions for transition.** Creating a staff position that is assigned to adult students can support them in the transition to career or postsecondary. Transition specialists can work with admissions and counseling staff at local colleges, so students have a smooth hand off to college programs and services. In addition to admissions and enrollment policies that facilitate transitions, a classified staff member can help to increase transitions.

**Collaborate through shared staffing.** Shared staffing, including counselors, transition specialists, and faculty, served the dual purpose of saving resources and amplifying opportunities that would otherwise only be available to a few students, as well as structuring a warm hand off from the adult school to the college.

**Formalize postsecondary activities on the adult school campus.** Programs that took place on the adult school campus were especially effective. Rather than having a “college day” where adult school students visit a college campus, institutions can formalize a regular schedule of college representatives coming to the adult school campus. This provides a sustained point of contact for students, rather than a one-time workshop or field trip, and leads to a smooth transfer between the adult school and the college.

## Appendix: Methods

In 2019, WestEd conducted a mixed methods project that explored the California Adult Education Program (CAEP) rates of adult learner transitions to postsecondary and its promising practices that supported learner transitions. The initial phase, Phase 1, was a quantitative analysis of data from the CAEP Adult Education Pipeline (AEP) dashboard, a statewide data system supported by the California Community Colleges. Phase 1 was followed by a qualitative

phase, Phase 2, which explored adult education program staff’s perceptions of practices that supported high rates of transitions. WestEd’s interest in exploring these transitions was prompted by the paucity of research on adult learners’ transitions into postsecondary courses. Guiding questions included who is making postsecondary transitions and what practices support learner transitions. Following the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office initiative, a transition to postsecondary was defined as a student’s progression from adult education to enrollment in (1) a Career and Technical Education (CTE) course or (2) a for-credit community college course.<sup>6</sup>

In Phase 1, WestEd staff analyzed data reported to the AEP dashboard for program years 2017/18, 2018/19, and 2019/20 to understand transitions to postsecondary by the following:

- Student characteristics
- CAEP program area
- Institution type
- Institution size

For Phase 2, using the 2019/20 program year data, institutions from each Institution Type with a 35 percent rate of transition or higher were identified and program staff were invited to participate in an interview with WestEd staff. The final sample included a total of 20 programs: six small, seven medium, and seven large adult education programs. In the fall of 2021, WestEd staff conducted Zoom interviews with 46 key staff (e.g., career center directors, consortium directors, deans of adult and continuing education, school principals, adult school and community college educators, and other administrators and faculty). Interviews examined the values and culture of the adult education program, policies (either formal or informal) that did or could lead to improved transition, and practices the interviewees felt contributed the most to their success. Interviews were coded for promising practices from which themes were identified.

6. For additional information, see the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office [Adult Education Pipeline: Metric Definition Dictionary](#) (2023).

## CAEP Program Area

- Adult-based education
- Adult secondary education
- English as a second language

## Institution Type

- Noncredit community college
- K-12 adult school

## Institution Size

- Small: 1-300 students
- Medium: 301-1,000 students
- Large: 1,001 or more students

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