

Education

Rebuilding Educational Pipeline, Refreshing California's Workforce Critical

- Addressing COVID-19 and filling the shoes of retiring baby boomers are key challenges for California's schools.
- Although California's workforce has largely returned to normal after COVID-19, the effects of the pandemic on California's students and educational pipeline are troubling.

COVID-19 changed the landscape of California's workplaces in myriad ways, with masking, social distancing, and working remotely becoming the new normal. But as workplaces across California have largely returned to the pre-existing normal, one question remains — what effect will COVID have on California's future workforce? How will COVID's disruption of California's schools affect our children and future leaders?

LEARNING LOSS DURING PANDEMIC

We are just now beginning to receive standardized test results that can help paint a picture of COVID's ripples in our schools — and the initial results are not good. Two out of 3 California students did not meet state math standards and more than half did not meet English standards on state assessments taken in the spring. The percentages of California students meeting state standards in math and English dropped significantly between 2019 and 2022 — 7 percentage points (from 40% to 33%) and 4 percentage points (from 51% to 47%), respectively. (See California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress. Comparison is of 2019 and 2022 results due to closure in 2020 and incomplete testing in 2021. Results available in detail at <https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/>.)

The test results are even more devastating for Black, Latino, low-income and other historically underserved students — 84% of Black students and 79% of Latino and low-income students did not meet state math standards in 2022.

Science-based learning, which is particularly important for many of California's technology-focused jobs, also appears to have been disrupted. (See Public Policy Institute, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Science Education," available at <https://www.ppic.org/publication/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-science-education/>.)

Nationwide testing, called the Nation's Report Card, confirmed this learning loss: Eighth graders in nearly every state and fourth graders in a large majority of states, including California, saw drops in average math scores since the pre-pandemic 2018–19 school year. (See "NAEP Mathematics Assessment," again comparing 2019 and 2022. Results available in detail at <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/mathematics/2022/>.)

With all this in mind, the question becomes: how can California policymakers help these students recover from the difficulties of COVID-19 and prepare for their future careers?

SENIOR WORKERS

In addition to the educational disruption on our youth, we also must consider the other end of the workforce — senior workers. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, experts estimated that California's educational system would likely produce approximately 1 million fewer college graduates than needed by 2025. Now, the pandemic has accelerated the so-called "Great Resignation," and will make the demands on California's educational and talent pipeline all the greater, leaving policymakers with the same profound question: how will California workplaces fill the roles of baby boomers as they leave the workforce for retirement?

Putting these two concerns together, the truth is simple. California's economy desperately needs new workers and needs a high-quality educational pipeline that can prepare workers for the jobs of tomorrow.

SKILLS FOR TOMORROW

California youth — and diverse immigrant population — must be given the skills they need to fit into California's

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workforce by California's educational pipeline. The California economy needs all kinds of labor — including workers with technical skills, college degrees and even post-graduate degrees. And, looking at the situation from the perspective of individual workers, each Californian deserves a chance to earn the training and skills needed to support themselves and their families, and enjoy the opportunities of a rewarding career path.

Although advanced degrees and technical training statistically improve incomes, not all Californians have the same opportunity for those improved outcomes. According to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), low-income, first-generation, Latino, and African American students — who make up most of the state's public high school students — are less likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college and graduate from college than their peers.

State leaders have directed billions of dollars to K–12 education since the end of the recession — and more in the 2021 surplus-heavy budget — but still more improvement is needed. To improve K-12 education and repair the injuries of COVID-19, policymakers should impose rigorous accountability in schools, more choice for families, and greater collaboration between stakeholders.

The goal should be to ensure that every student graduates from high school prepared for the next step — whether that's college or career. Although college can provide the most immediate boost to mobility, graduates can profit from post-secondary choices other than a four-year college. For example, PPIC estimates that one-third of all jobs in California require some college, but not a full bachelor's degree, and sees this share holding steady in the future. In addition, work-based learning, such as internships and apprenticeships, as well as credentialing and certificate programs, also can prepare students for fulfilling careers.

EMPLOYER INVOLVEMENT

California businesses must play a role in filling California's skills gap by working with educational programs to identify the skills that California's economy will need to grow and must help students develop those skills.

For example, successful high schools often use Linked Learning programs, integrated curriculum, and partnership academies that use standards-based, rigorous, career-oriented academic and career technical education (CTE) courses to

increase student engagement and performance. To ensure the effectiveness of these programs, schools engage employers as partners to offer work-based learning opportunities, such as internships, mentorships, job shadowing and other workplace exposure experiences.

In 2018, the California Chamber of Commerce supported a successful legislative effort (AB 1743; O'Donnell; D-Long Beach, eventually AB 1808; Committee on Budget) to reauthorize and provide new funding for the Career Technical Education Incentive Grant Program, which will enable high schools to provide high-quality CTE programs linked to career pathways. The CalChamber also successfully supported targeted funding (SB 1243; Portantino; D-La Cañada Flintridge, eventually AB 1809; Committee on Budget) to community colleges to improve the recruitment of students into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) pathways.

More recently in 2019, the CalChamber supported successful legislation (AB 1240; Weber; D-San Diego) to encourage California high schools to prepare students with both college preparatory courses and CTE courses.

Legislatively, the CalChamber also has moved to increase college access by supporting AB 469 (Reyes; D-San Bernardino, 2021), which required all high school seniors complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Although it will add no costs for students and minimal costs for schools, it will ensure that every high school student knows what financial aid is available to them to seek post-secondary education.

But legislative support is not enough. Employers also must take the lead in ensuring that educational pipelines are aligning skills with jobs. Rather than waiting for training and workforce agencies to deliver prospects with hoped-for skills, companies should treat their workforce needs like they would any supply chain: project workforce demands, identify and clearly define the necessary skills, and partner with education or training providers to develop curriculum tailored to specific jobs. This coordination allows people to enter these training programs knowing that they will lead to employment and employers can rely on a steady pipeline of talent, ready to fill open positions.

MORE WORKERS STILL NEEDED

Despite much ado being made of the California economy recovering the jobs lost since 2019 — and that is indeed good news — the truth remains that the state economy is hampered

by a lack of workers, particularly in blue collar jobs. Baby boomers are retiring, and youth employment rates remain below their 2019 levels, according to nationwide data.

Moreover, high housing costs, addiction, incarceration and federal immigration restrictions all provide barriers that prevent workers from joining California’s educational pipeline and contributing to our state’s economy.

CALCHAMBER POSITION

California’s economy is the envy of the world — but it cannot continue to thrive without an effective educational pipeline to support a skilled workforce. For the sake of economic growth, social cohesion, and personal fulfillment of individual Californians, California’s leaders must address the damage of COVID-19 to our students’ learning and ensure our schools are providing the necessary skills for tomorrow’s workforce.



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