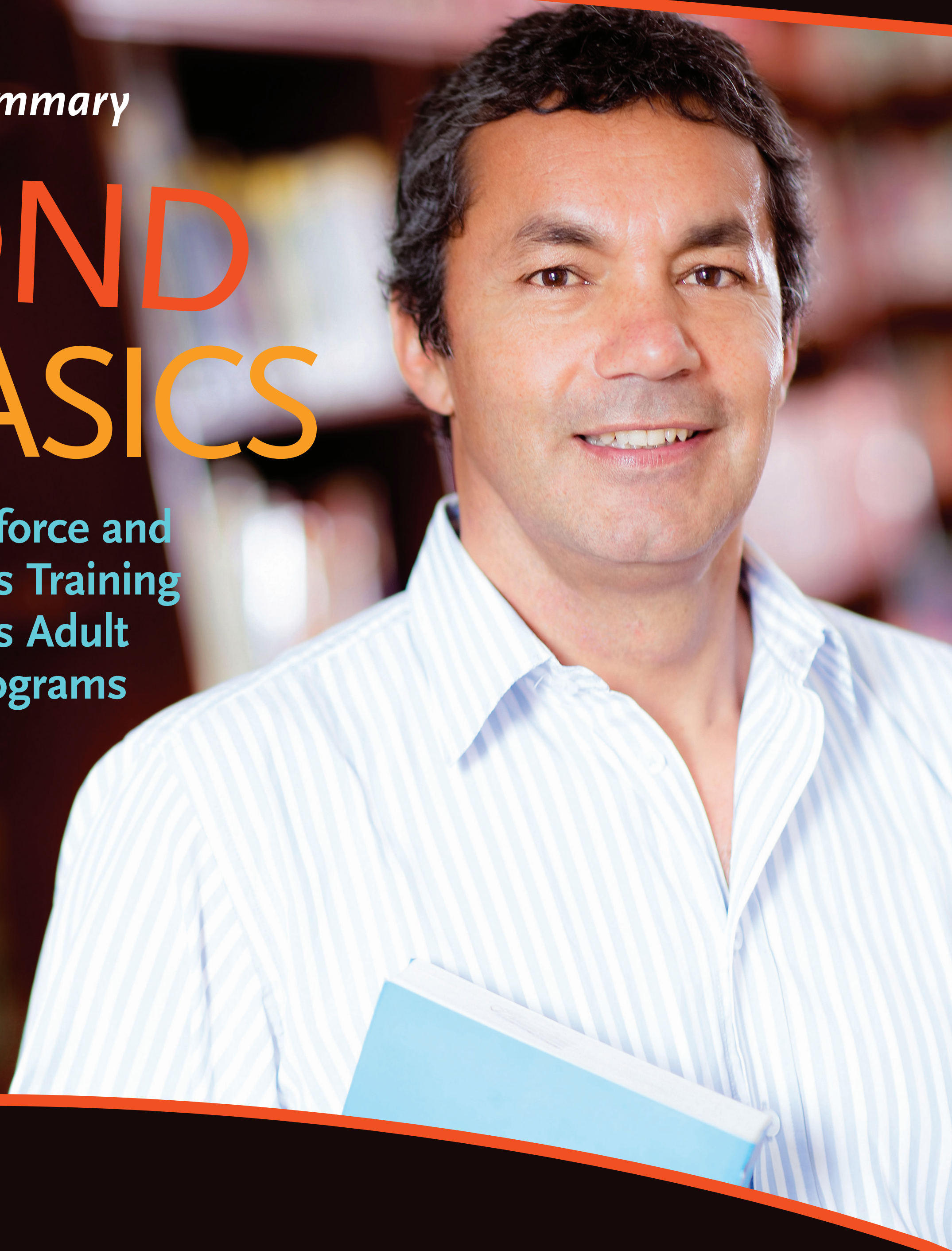
Executive Summary

BEYOND THE BASICS

Integrating Workforce and College-Readiness Training into California's Adult Basic Skills Programs



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JULY 2019

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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OVERVIEW

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, approximately one in ten adults — nearly 36 million people — lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, while 27 million adults lack a high school diploma. Federally funded adult basic skills programs, such as Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (ASE) courses, have traditionally served the educational needs of low-skilled adults. However, these programs have struggled to help undereducated adults transition into postsecondary education and the workforce. Over the last decade, new models for adult education have emerged that integrate basic skills education with workforce and college-readiness training. These integrated programs show new promise for increasing the academic and labor market successes of low-skilled adults — and they have been catching on across the country.

With one of the nation's largest educational systems, California provides a unique environment for studying these trends. State leaders have been highly active in developing career pathway models that integrate academic and workforce training in their K-12 and workforce sectors; however, less is known about how these programs are being integrated into adult basic skills education. With support from The James Irvine Foundation, MDRC researchers conducted phone interviews and site visits with 39 adult basic skills programs and leaders throughout California to learn more about the state's programming and offerings. This report analyzes the need for adult basic skills programming across the state of California, the status of programs in high-need areas, and promising models that integrate workforce and college-readiness training with adult basic skills education.

This report makes clear that The Irvine Foundation's priority regions, including the San Joaquin Valley and the Salinas Valley as well as Riverside and San Bernardino counties, have some of the highest concentrations of undereducated and impoverished adults in the state, accounting for over one-fourth of the state's low-skilled adult populations. Additionally, adult basic skills programming in these regions is still recovering from severe budget cutbacks in 2008 to 2012, when many programs were forced to close or dramatically reduce their enrollments due to the Great Recession. As a result, many programs focused more on rebuilding their core offerings and less on integrating adult basic skills instruction with workforce and college-readiness services.

MDRC researchers were able to identify 10 programs in the priority regions and across the state that had integrated basic skills education with workforce and college preparation. A relatively limited number of programs existed within the state's traditional ABE and ASE programs, so programs in other sectors such as workforce development are also highlighted. The report reveals that several opportunities exist for strengthening the development of these programs within adult basic skills schools, building on the lessons learned from promising programs in California. It also sets forth key incentives and structured learning opportunities for expanding integrated adult basic skills programs on a larger scale in California — and beyond.

PREFACE

FEDERALLY FUNDED ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS such as Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (ASE) have long paved the way to high school credentials for low-skilled adults. But until recently, these programs have struggled to help these individuals access higher-level training and postsecondary education. This has begun to change, however, as new studies uncover the promise of adult education programs that integrate basic skills training with workforce and college-readiness instruction.

In 2010, studies traced positive labor market outcomes for low-skilled adults to integrated adult education programs such as Washington State's Integrated Basic Education Skills and Training (I-BEST). The I-BEST initiative exemplifies an approach to integrated education that has swept the country and inspired some states to promote the scaling up of these programs. Furthermore, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 is a federal policy that provides incentives for the development of Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs throughout the country.

Despite these developments, relatively little is known about the implementation of integrated adult education programs in states with large populations of low-skilled adults. California, as the most populous state in the country and one of the largest economies in the world, provides a promising place to study these programs. With support from The James Irvine Foundation, this report seeks to fill this gap by investigating programs in some of California's poorest regions and identifying model programs across the state.

Based on interviews with over 30 programs and leaders in the state, this report reveals that even though a number of these programs have been implemented statewide, relatively few are integrated into ABE and ASE programs. Instead, many programs that focus on workforce and college-readiness skills tend to target individuals with higher-level academic skills and qualifications. Nevertheless, this report identifies a number of promising programs across California's adult education and workforce sectors that offer a template for building and strengthening IET models in ABE and ASE programs.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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We appreciate the many people who read and provided comments on this report. In particular, we are grateful to those who gave us excellent written and oral feedback, including Alexander Mayer, Frieda Molina, Leigh Parise, Rob Ivry, and Rachel Rosen at MDRC; Neil Kelly and Javier Romero at the California Community Colleges' Chancellor's Office; Carolyn Zachry at the California Department of Education; and Judy Mortrude at the Center for Law and Social Policy. Finally, we would like to thank Anaga Dalal, who edited the report, and Carolyn Thomas, who prepared it for publication.

The Authors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WITH NEARLY 36 MILLION AMERICAN ADULTS lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills and 27 million lacking a high school diploma, the need for adult education in the United States is marked.[1] The multiple challenges these adults face — ranging from high rates of poverty to poor health — have pushed many policymakers and practitioners to search for more effective strategies for educating this population and transitioning them into living-wage careers.[2] Federally funded adult basic skills programs have often served as the primary mechanism for educating low-skilled adults, English language learners, and those without a high school diploma.[3] While these programs have traditionally focused on helping adults improve their literacy and numeracy skills, the changing U.S. labor market has increasingly pushed programs to adopt models that also build workforce and college-readiness skills.[4] In turn, programs that integrate basic skills and workforce training have become an increasingly important — and effective — part of the adult education landscape.[5]

California, with its large population of undereducated adults, provides an interesting case study for these national trends. The state has traditionally invested heavily in education for low-skilled adults with budgets that quadruple the level of federal investment in the state.[6] Furthermore, California has integrated academic and workforce skills training across its educational systems through initiatives

1 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2014* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2014); U.S. Census Bureau, *2013-2017 — American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

2 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Time for the U.S. to Reskill* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2013); Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, *Integrated Education and Training Policy Toolkit* (Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition, 2016).

3 Claudia Tamassia, Marylou Lennon, Kentaro Yamamoto, and Irwin Kirsch, *Adult Education in America: A First Look at Results from the Adult Education Program and Learner Surveys* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2007).

4 Bergson-Shilcock (2016).

5 Deena Schwartz, Julie Strawn, and Maureen Sarna, *Career Pathways Research and Evaluation Synthesis: Career Pathways Design Study* (Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates, 2018); David Fein and Jill Hamadyk, *Bridging the Opportunity Divide for Low-Income Youth: Implementation and Early Impacts of the Year Up Program* (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018); Karen Gardiner, Howard Rolston, David Fein, and Sung-Woo Cho, *Pima Community College Pathways to Healthcare Program: Implementation and Early Impact Report*, OPRE Report No. 2017-10 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017); Howard Rolston, Elizabeth Copson, and Karen Gardiner, *Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement: Implementation and Early Impact Report* (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

6 California Department of Education and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, *Adult Education Regional Planning* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2015).

such as the California Career Pathways Trust and the Strong Workforce Program.[7] But it is unclear how much of workforce and college-readiness skills training has been integrated into programs for adults with basic skills needs and how they are growing their proficiency in these areas.[8]

This report, which was funded by The James Irvine Foundation, analyzes the need for adult education in underserved regions of California and identifies promising programs for adults that integrate basic skills education with college- and career-readiness training. Based on phone interviews and site visits with 39 programs and adult education leaders, the report reveals that The Irvine Foundation's priority regions, including the San Joaquin Valley and the Salinas Valley as well as Riverside and San Bernardino counties, are home to more than one-fourth of the state's undereducated and impoverished adults.[9] Adult basic skills programming in these regions is still recovering from the Great Recession, with many programs still focused on rebuilding basic academic services rather than launching new models that integrate adult basic skills education with workforce and college preparation. This report, however, highlights 10 programs that integrate adult basic skills education with workforce and college preparation, though they tend not to be centered within the state's traditional adult basic skills programs or target those without a high school diploma. The report also discusses mechanisms for strengthening the development of these programs within adult basic skills schools.

What Is Adult Basic Skills Education?

Federally funded adult basic skills programs in the United States have traditionally focused on four key goals: improving adult literacy levels, advancing career-readiness skills, promoting active parent participation in children's education, and earning secondary school credentials.[10] The three types of programming for low-skilled adults include English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction for non-native speakers, Adult Basic Education (ABE) for individuals with skills below ninth-grade proficiency levels, and Adult Secondary Education (ASE) for individuals with ninth- to twelfth-grade skills.[11]

Traditionally, adult education has been a precursor to college and occupational training; however, many programs and states across the country have begun offering occupational training and access to postsecondary education concurrently with adult basic skills education. This shift was spurred by promising results from Washington State's Integrated Basic Education Skills and Training (I-BEST) program in 2004, which provided basic skills and technical training courses that certified graduates

7 Career Ladders Project and Jobs for the Future, *College-to-Career Pathways: Getting from Here to There on the Roadmap for a Stronger California Economy* (Sacramento, CA: California Community Colleges Task Force on Workforce, Job Creation, and a Strong Economy, 2015).

8 OECD (2013).

9 U.S. Census Bureau (2018).

10 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, *AEFLA Resource Guide* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2017).

11 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, *Adult Basic Education Grant Program Factsheet* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2017).

for work in high-demand industries such as nursing and childhood education.[12] Over the last decade, many states and funders have promoted the development of these programs on a larger scale and, as of 2014, federal regulations in the Workforce and Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) began encouraging adult education providers to establish programs that are similar to I-BEST through the establishment of the Integrated Education and Training (IET) model.[13]

A Look at Adult Basic Skills Education in California

Approximately four and a half million California adults lack a high school diploma. This is approximately 17.5 percent of the adult population in the state. Additionally, 12 percent of California adults — three million individuals — are living in poverty.[14] Those without a high school diploma in the state are disproportionately Hispanic, Latino, or foreign-born, while those living in poverty are disproportionately black, Hispanic, or Latino. Further, The Irvine Foundation's priority regions have a disproportionate share of both undereducated and impoverished adults. The priority regions make up 22 percent of the state's total population, but account for 29 percent of those in the state who are without a high school diploma and 27 percent of those living in poverty.

California has traditionally provided a rich environment for adult basic skills education, with an annual budget of around $750 million annually prior to 2008 — larger than the adult education spending totals for all other states *combined*.[15] The state has also been heavily focused on developing career pathways for low-skilled adolescents and adults across its educational systems through a variety of state and national initiatives.[16] However, California's adult basic skills programs have struggled over the last decade to recover from major funding cuts and the closure or severe reduction of programming in many adult basic skills schools.[17] Additionally, the fragmentation of adult skills programming across K-12 school districts, community colleges, and other nonprofit organizations has made it challenging to track student outcomes and build integrated programs.[18]

In 2015, the state's Adult Education Block Grant (AEBG) legislation reinvigorated adult basic skills education in California by providing $500 million to 71 local consortia to develop an integrated adult

12 John Wachen, Davis Jenkins, and Michelle Van Noy, *How I-BEST Works: Findings from a Field Study* (New York: Community College Research Center, 2010); Davis Jenkins, Matthew Zeidenberg, and Gregory S. Kienzl, "Educational Outcomes of I-BEST, Washington State Community and Technical College System's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program: Findings from a Multivariate Analysis," CCRC Working Paper No. 16 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2009); Matthew Zeidenberg, Sung-Woo Cho, and Davis Jenkins, "Washington State's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program (I-BEST) New Evidence of Effectiveness," CCRC Working Paper No. 20 (New York: Community College Research Center, 2010).

13 Bergson-Shilcock (2016).

14 U.S. Census Bureau (2018). Adults are those 25 years old and older; poverty is defined as the percentage of people whose income has been below the poverty line in the past 12 months.

15 California Department of Education and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2015).

16 Career Ladders Project and Jobs for the Future (2015).

17 California Department of Education and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2015).

18 Mac Taylor, *The 2018-19 Budget: Adult Education Analysis* (Sacramento, CA: Legislative Analyst's Office, California Legislature, 2018); California Department of Education and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2015).

education system in their regions; consortia members consist of all the education providers within a region, including community colleges, K-12 schools, and other community-based organizations that provide education and training for low-skilled adults.[19] While this restructuring, now named the California Adult Education Program (CAEP), has encouraged a number of changes in adult basic skills programming, less is known about whether and how these reforms have been implemented and whether programs are building IET-like models that integrate academic skills and career readiness.

Adult Basic Skills Education in the Priority Regions

Overall, adult basic skills programs that are run by K-12 school districts in the priority regions, and the buildings in which they have been housed, mirror high school settings and have faced many of the same challenges as adult basic skills programs nationally. Programs in these regions typically provide three types of federally funded adult basic skills courses (ABE, ASE, and ESL) along with Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses. Classes were similar to high school models, with courses offered a few hours a day on select days of the week and during the evenings. Given funding restrictions, most programs also implemented a number of management practices common in adult education, such as open enrollment and open exit systems, where students are continuously enrolled in programs throughout the year. Many programs also relied on part-time teaching staff and had limited capabilities for tracking student outcomes.

Though they offered some services aimed at transitioning students to college and work, most adult schools offering ABE and ASE courses in The Irvine Foundation's priority regions had not yet integrated college- and career-readiness training into their programming in a significant way. Program leaders and instructors were generally focused on the more traditional goals of increasing student literacy, numeracy, and high school credentialing. Most programs offered services to help students transition to college or careers, with the assistance of dedicated transition specialists, college and career fairs, and transition workshops. However, for most programs, these services were focused on students who had nearly completed a high school credential and were not integrated with classroom instruction. Some adult schools tried or were hoping to integrate workforce training and educational programs, but most identified important barriers to this work, such as limited staff capacity, misalignment between K-12 and postsecondary education policies, and limited exposure to, or cross-agency training with, these models.

Common Features of Programs in California

Despite the obstacles to integrating workplace instruction in adult education programs in California, the research team identified college- and career-readiness programs that concurrently offered basic skills instruction. Overall, these programs demonstrated the implementation of several IET and

19 California Department of Education and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, *Adult Education Block Grant Planning Report* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2016).

career pathway components, including the integration of technical skills training and basic skills development; supports for job entry such as training in workplace expectations and interviewing; direct connections with employers; and support services such as counseling, emergency funding, and child care to address barriers to program participation.

However, programs were relatively limited in their offering of other types of IET or career pathway components. For instance, only a few programs included paid work experience or an opportunity to earn college credit, perhaps because some state regulations do not allow paid internships as part of non-credit community college programs. Additionally, while these programs served lower-skilled individuals, they tended not to directly target those without a high school diploma and enrolled many students who had already obtained this credential, which suggests that non-high school graduates may be underserved by these programs.

Encouraging the Growth of IET Programs for Adult Basic Skills Students

These findings suggest that California education leaders and policymakers have additional opportunities for growth and advancement in helping low-skilled, undereducated adults gain workforce skills while building their academic skills. Below are potential ideas for this type of programming in ABE and ASE settings.

HELP PROGRAMS BUILD STAFF CAPACITY

One of the most critical challenges that adult school leaders raised to building their program offerings was the lack of a stable teaching force. Nearly all the programs examined in this study relied heavily on part-time staff to teach their ABE and ASE courses. While these individuals were committed to their classes and students, leaders noted that they were often less connected to developing and helping manage an adult school's overall programming compared with full-time faculty. Additionally, most schools only had a handful of full-time teachers and administrators who could assist with this effort. Finally, a number of program leaders discussed their fears about their financing, anticipating that funding could be cut once again and force them to shut down any new initiatives.

Given these challenges, one of the most promising ways that California leaders might help programs build more integrated basic skills and workforce training programs (as well as their general academic courses) is to help schools bring in more full-time staff members. These staff members could dedicate more time to building the infrastructure of their schools and add new features such as college- and career-readiness training for students. Such work could also be facilitated by allocating resources to noninstructional work, such as the development of new education and training programs.

BUILD CAPACITY FOR CROSS-AGENCY LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

Despite rebuilding or severely reducing services following the Great Recession, many adult schools appear to be progressing toward additional college- and career-readiness programming. For instance, most schools had counselors who provided information and advice to students about transitions to

college or workforce training programs, and most programs offered at least some CTE courses at their school. Additionally, many program leaders had attempted or were planning to attempt the development of integrated adult basic skills courses that provided workforce training in growing fields such as allied health.

One of the key challenges that leaders identified in furthering this work was the lack of cross-program or cross-agency coordination that might help build more integrated programs. Even when programs were collocated in the same building, leaders noted that not enough cross-program coordination had occurred — and they hoped to do more of this in the future. Allowing space for these leaders to build their knowledge about other programs and consider how they might better integrate the education and training across them is one basic step in helping build more integrated programs for lower-skilled adults. Additionally, providing models for how these services could be integrated could help further this work.

BUILD EXPOSURE TO IET AND CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAMS

IET and career pathway programming was limited in most ABE and ASE settings. In some cases, program leaders highlighted their staff's lack of familiarity with career pathway models or had somewhat limited knowledge of these program models themselves. Additionally, in interviews, a number of program staff highlighted their focus on the traditional goals of adult basic skills programs and a number were concerned about the resources and capacity required to develop these types of programs.

Given these comments, California education and policy leaders may need to do more to build the knowledge of program leaders and instructors about career pathway models and provide practical examples of how these can be built into ABE and ASE programs. CAEP leaders have already begun spotlighting programs that have integrated workforce training and career pathway models, and have allocated resources for their further development.[20] Additionally, the Center for Law and Social Policy's report on the implementation of the CAEP policies provided a number of important recommendations for how the California adult education consortia should build this work into their planning — and CAEP leaders have added these recommendations into the consortia's planning documents.

PROVIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN IET PROGRAMS

In addition to exposing program staff to the IET model, leaders might also provide local and national technical assistance to help adult schools implement these programs. California adult education leaders have built a strong professional development system for adult education through the Technical Assistance Project, which brings together multiple partner organizations in California to support instructors and staff in the 71 adult education consortia. Together, leaders from these two groups might consider how adult basic skills programs can best integrate career pathway models.

20 Examples of these resources include CAEP student transitions resources, CAEP's resource bank, CAEP's showcase of practices with promise. See, for example, https://caladulted.org/Administrators/373, http://resources.caladulted.org/, and http://aebgpracticeswithpromise.com/showcase_successes.asp.

California leaders might also look beyond their state for further guidance on how these programs can be developed. For instance, states such as Indiana, Virginia, Kentucky, Minnesota, and North Carolina have developed state-level public-private partnerships that involve multiple educational institutions (including adult basic skills programs), workforce development agencies, businesses, and community based organizations, to build career pathway models beginning at the ABE level.[21] These partnerships typically bring together multiple funding streams, including federal funding such as WIOA dollars, financial aid through the Ability to Benefit clause, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program along with state funding streams to build multifaceted educational, training, and support programs for low-skilled adults. Additionally, national organizations such as the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) have developed guidance documents for how differing agencies can collaborate to build stronger career pathway programs that span multiple sectors.[22] These leaders might provide valuable information about how such pathways could be worked into California's adult basic skills programs.

INCENTIVIZE THE DEVELOPMENT OF IET MODELS IN ADULT BASIC SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Broadening exposure to career pathway models may expose these programs to administrative staff and teaching instructors, but this does not guarantee that these models will be developed within individual schools. As such, state and philanthropic leaders might consider ways to incentivize the development and growth of these programs, particularly in underserved regions. For instance, funders might consider developing a set of grants earmarked for developing these programs and ask schools to put forth their plans through a competitive bidding process. Additionally, leaders might consider partnering with programs that have built IET models and with those that are interested in implementing these programs.

Summing Up and Looking Ahead

After a number of challenging years of budget cuts and program closures, California's adult basic skills programs are making strong progress in rebuilding and moving closer to the type of collaborative networks that will help build the workforce and college-readiness training models that low-skilled individuals need. California stands poised to spur this type of growth and development through its many successes in building career pathway programs in other sectors. Learning from these models and building them within adult basic skills programs may help the state further serve and support the millions of California adults struggling to escape poverty and build brighter futures for themselves and their families.

21 See, for example, www.in.gov/dwd/adulted_workin.htm, www.pluggedinva.com/our-model, www.elevatevirginia.org, kyskillsu.ky.gov, careerwise.minnstate.edu/education/fasttrac.html, and www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/college-and-career-readiness/basic-skills-plus.

22 See CLASP's blog post ("Illinois' Career Pathways Definition is a Model for States," by Judy Mortrude, June 29, 2018) and its brief on guided pathways ("Better Together: Career and Guided Pathways," by Judy Mortrude, September 2018) at www.clasp.org.

ABOUT MDRC

MDRC IS A NONPROFIT, NONPARTISAN SOCIAL AND EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff members bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-prisoners, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.