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AB-323 Strong Workforce Program: work-based learning opportunities. (2025-2026)

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Date Published: 10/06/2025 02:00 PM

Assembly Bill No. 323

CHAPTER 255

An act to amend Sections 88821 and 88825 of the Education Code, relating to community colleges.

[Approved by Governor October 03, 2025. Filed with Secretary of State October 03, 2025.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 323, Fong. Strong Workforce Program: work-based learning opportunities.

Existing law establishes the California Community Colleges, under the administration of the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, as one of the segments of public postsecondary education in this state. Existing law establishes the Strong Workforce Program to provide funding to career technical education regional consortia made up of community college districts and local educational agencies, as specified. Existing law requires the office of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges to, no later than June 30, 2017, bring before the board of governors any policies, regulations, and guidance necessary to accomplish, among other things, providing work-based learning opportunities for students that increase their employability and earning potential, as provided. Existing law requires a percentage of the funds apportioned for community colleges under the program to be apportioned directly to community college districts in the consortia to fund, among other things, student grants to cover fees for third-party certification and licensing.

This bill would require the chancellor's office to revise, no later than June 30, 2026, the above-described policies, regulations, and guidance necessary to provide students, employers, or both, with paid work-based learning opportunities, as provided. The bill would authorize a community college district to also use those funds apportioned directly to community college districts to provide direct support to students, employers, or both, for paid work-based learning to increase employability and employment, as provided.

Vote: majority Appropriation: no Fiscal Committee: yes Local Program: no

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1. Section 88821 of the Education Code is amended to read:

88821. (a) The Legislature finds and declares all of the following:

- (1) California's economic competitiveness is fueled, in part, by the strength of its regional economies and its skilled workforce.
- (2) Upward social and economic mobility helps keep the state's economy diversified and vibrant.
- (3) The attainment of industry-valued "middle skill credentials" serves as a gateway for a large and diverse number of careers in the state's economy.

(4) California's local educational agencies, community college districts, interested public four-year universities, local workforce development boards, economic development and industry leaders, and local civic representatives should collaboratively work together to inform the offerings of courses, programs, pathways, and workforce development opportunities that enable students to access the current and future job market and further social and economic mobility.

(b) The Strong Workforce Program is hereby established as a K–14 state education, economic, and workforce development initiative for the purpose of expanding the availability of high-quality, industry-valued career technical education and workforce development courses, programs, pathways, credentials, certificates, and degrees.

(c) To facilitate program coordination and alignment with other workforce training, education, and employment services in the state, the Strong Workforce Program shall operate in a manner that complies with the California Strategic Workforce Development Plan, required pursuant to the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128), and expand upon existing consortia infrastructure.

(d) To avoid duplication of effort, activities funded under the Strong Workforce Program shall be informed by, aligned with, and expand upon the activities of existing workforce and education regional partnerships, including those partnership activities that pertain to regional planning efforts established pursuant to the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128), adult education block grant consortia, and other career technical education programs.

(e) All of the following guiding principles apply to each consortium participating in the Strong Workforce Program:

(1) Any community college district or local educational agency participating in the consortium shall ensure that its career technical education and workforce development courses, credentials, certificates, degrees, programs, and pathway offerings, as applicable, are responsive to the needs of employers, workers, civic leaders, and students.

(2) The consortium shall collaborate with other public institutions, including, but not limited to, adult education consortia, local workforce development boards, and interested California State University and University of California institutions.

(3) The consortium shall collaborate with civic representatives, representatives from the labor community, and economic development and industry sector leaders within the region.

(4) The consortium shall include collaborating entities and persons identified in this subdivision in planning meetings, provide them with adequate notice of the consortium's proposed decisions, and solicit, consider, and respond to comments from them regarding the consortium's proposed decisions.

(5) Collaborative efforts shall focus upon evidence-based decisionmaking and student success with workforce outcomes aligned with the performance accountability measures of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128), and closing labor market and employment gaps. Each consortium shall strive to align programmatic offerings in the most effective and efficient manner to avoid duplication of effort and streamline access to services, and education and training opportunities.

(6) Community college districts, local educational agencies, and other entities participating in a consortium are encouraged to develop long-term partnerships with private sector employers and labor partners to provide coordinated courses, programs, and pathways with employer involvement in the assessment, planning, and development of career technical education courses, programs, and pathways. To the extent practicable, employer partnerships should build upon regional partnerships formed pursuant to the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128) and other state or federal programs.

(7) Community college districts, local educational agencies, and other entities participating in a consortium are encouraged to develop and work closely with public and private organizations that offer workforce development programs and pathways to individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities to provide a comprehensive approach to address workforce readiness and employment.

(f) The chancellor's office shall, in consultation with the California Workforce Development Board, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, and its partners formed pursuant to the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128), as applicable, develop and implement policies and guidance necessary to implement the Community College component of the Strong Workforce Program, including policies and guidance necessary for consortia, including community college districts and their regional partners, to increase the number of aligned middle skill and career technical education courses, programs, pathways, credentials, certificates, and degrees. No later than June 30, 2017, the chancellor's office shall develop and implement policies and guidance pursuant to this subdivision and bring before the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges any policies, regulations, and guidance necessary to accomplish all of the following:

(1) Facilitate the development, implementation, and sharing of career technical education effective practices, curriculum models and courses, and community college credentials, certificates, degrees, and programs across regions and among community

college districts.

(2) Enable community college districts to develop career technical education and workforce outcomes, and applicable associate degrees and certificates as appropriate.

(3) Provide accessible performance and labor market data that can be used flexibly by participating community college districts and their regional partners to support the implementation of the Strong Workforce Program and related efforts to align regional workforce and education programming with regional labor market needs.

(4) Encourage local efficiency through coordinated and collaborative regional workforce efforts in which community college districts are partners.

(5) Support curriculum processes to ensure that students are able to efficiently transfer college-level career technical education credits across community college districts and to the California State University and the University of California.

(6) Improve sector-based engagement with employers within a region.

(7) Provide, in partnership with employers, work-based learning opportunities for students that increase their employability and earning potential.

(8) Enable community college districts to facilitate and optimize their resources to support the Strong Workforce Program and other related regional workforce development efforts.

(9) Ensure that community college district Strong Workforce Program expenditures are focused on improving student success with workforce outcomes for all students enrolled in community college career technical education courses, programs, and pathways.

(10) (A) For the Community College component only, notwithstanding the June 30, 2017, implementation date specified in this subdivision, develop and implement a plan to streamline the course and curriculum approval process, both at the state and local levels. The plan shall reflect an expedited state approval process for career technical education courses, programs, and certificates, and may include the elimination of an existing state course and program approval process. The plan shall reflect one of the following two options:

(i) A process of course and curriculum approval that enables community college districts to develop a course or program within one academic year and to offer that course or program the subsequent academic year.

(ii) A process of course and curriculum approval that enables community college districts to develop a course or program within one academic semester and to offer that course or program the subsequent academic semester.

(B) The plan described in subparagraph (A) shall also reflect the creation of a process that enables career technical education courses and programs to be portable among community college districts. This process shall enable a community college district to adapt, adopt, or adapt and adopt another community college district's approved career technical education courses, programs, and curriculum within one academic semester and to offer that course or program, or use that curriculum, the subsequent academic semester.

(C) The chancellor's office shall consult with the Legislature and the Governor before implementing the plan. The plan shall be developed no later than July 1, 2017, and implemented no later than January 1, 2018.

(11) Eliminate barriers to hiring qualified instructors for career technical education courses, including reevaluating the required minimum qualifications for career technical education instructors.

(g) Community college districts are encouraged to expedite the development of targeted credit or noncredit short-term workforce training programs, in accordance with all of the following:

(1) Short-term workforce training programs that focus on economic recovery and result in job placement.

(2) Short-term workforce training programs that focus on the reskilling and upskilling of individuals.

(3) (A) Short-term workforce training programs that have at least one proven employer partner, demonstrate job vacancies, and submit verification to the chancellor's office.

(B) For purposes of subparagraph (A), verification includes the projected number of individuals served, completion rates, and job placement rates.

(4) It is the intent of the Legislature that, where possible, short-term noncredit workforce training programs should be used to be responsive to the workforce training needs of employers, with the ability to transition to credit or noncredit courses and

programs upon successful completion of a program established pursuant to this subdivision. Colleges are encouraged to develop workforce training that uses competency-based approaches, and applies credit for prior learning where possible.

(h) After June 30, 2017, and only as necessary, the chancellor's office may develop and implement revised policies and guidance for the Community College component only, and bring regulations before the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges as necessary for a community college district and its regional partners to accomplish both of the following:

(1) Implement and expand the amount of aligned middle skill and career technical education credentials, certificates, degrees, courses, programs, and pathways in accordance with paragraphs (1) to (11), inclusive, of subdivision (f).

(2) Implement the recommendations of the Strong Workforce Task Force.

(i) No later than June 30, 2026, the chancellor's office shall revise any policies, regulations, and guidance necessary to provide students, employers, or both, with paid work-based learning opportunities that may be directly supported with funds apportioned directly to a community college district pursuant to clause (iv) of subparagraph (B) of paragraph (2) of subdivision (c) of Section 88825.

(j) (1) For purposes of this section, the chancellor's office shall consider input provided by relevant stakeholders, including the Academic Senate of the California Community Colleges, the Workforce Pathways Joint Advisory Committee, and the California Workforce Development Board, before implementing revised guidance, policies, or regulatory changes for the Community College component.

(2) For purposes of the Community College component and in compliance with the consultation requirements in Sections 70901 and 70902, the Academic Senate of the California Community Colleges shall establish a career technical education subcommittee to provide recommendations on career technical education issues. No less than 70 percent of the subcommittee shall consist of career technical education faculty. The subcommittee's charter shall require it to provide assistance to community college districts to ensure that career technical education and its instruction is responsive and aligned to current and emergent industry trends, and ensure that similar courses, programs, and degrees are portable among community college districts.

SEC. 2. Section 88825 of the Education Code is amended to read:

88825. (a) This section applies to the Community College component only, and applies commencing with the 2017–18 fiscal year.

(b) To promote the success of community college students and the career technical education programs that serve them, up to 5 percent of the funds appropriated for the Community College component may be allocated by the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges to a community college district for statewide activities to improve and administer the program, including the facilitation of system, program, and data alignment at the state and regional levels and the implementation of the 25 recommendations presented to the board of governors on January 19 and 20, 2016, by the Strong Workforce Task Force. The chancellor's office shall consult with the California Workforce Development Board and other appropriate state agencies on the development of all statewide activities that would be implemented by the selected district to facilitate broader workforce and education system alignment. Statewide coordination activities funded out of this allocation may include, but are not limited to, the following activities:

(1) State-level coordination for the development of labor market analyses pertaining to economic and industry trends and jobs projections for the purpose of supporting common regional planning efforts and the alignment of career technical education program offerings with regional labor market dynamics.

(2) Research, evaluation, and technical assistance on the use of effective local and regional policies, best practices, and model partnerships.

(3) Development and prototyping of innovative policies, practices, and coordinated services with local workforce and education partners.

(4) Participation of community college districts in existing regional coalitions and planning efforts.

(5) Cross-training local program staff.

(6) Development and maintenance of a state-level cross-system data reporting mechanism with partners formed pursuant to the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128) for the purpose of monitoring workforce program outcomes and performance accountability.

(7) Leveraging allocated funds with state and local partners through interagency agreements, memorandums of understanding, or other appropriate mechanisms.

(c) (1) Forty percent of the funds apportioned for the Community College component of the program shall be apportioned directly to the fiscal agents of the consortia for the purpose of funding regionally prioritized projects and programs that meet the needs of local and regional economies, including development of short-term workforce training programs focused on California's economic recovery from COVID-19 beginning in 2020, as identified in regional plans and federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128) regional plans.

(2) (A) Sixty percent of the funds apportioned for the Community College component of the program shall be apportioned directly to community college districts in the consortia. Funds apportioned directly to a community college district shall be expended for the purpose of funding regionally prioritized projects and programs within the community college district that meet the needs of local and regional economies, including development of short-term workforce training programs focused on California's economic recovery from COVID-19 beginning in 2020, as identified in regional plans and federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128) regional plans. As a condition of receiving direct funding, each community college district shall actively participate in its consortium.

(B) Funds apportioned directly to a community college district pursuant to subparagraph (A) may also be used for all of the following:

(i) Providing funds for student grants to cover fees for third-party certification and licensing.

(ii) Enhancing student services to support retention, work experience, and job placement.

(iii) Providing students with an integrated educational program that connects academic curricula to applied and experiential learning in the workplace, including, but not limited to, work-based learning programs and models.

(iv) Providing direct support to students, employers, or both, for paid work-based learning, including, but not limited to, apprenticeships, internships, externships, and student-run enterprises to increase employability and employment.

(d) The allocation of funds to a consortium shall be based on a schedule determined by the chancellor's office and is effective for the four years of each plan cycle. Within the four-year plan cycle, this schedule may be altered to reflect changes in the statewide allocation for the program as appropriated in the annual Budget Act.

(e) The chancellor's office shall provide to the Department of Finance and the Legislative Analyst's Office its recommendations for the allocation of funds available for each consortium no later than August 30 of each year. The department shall approve the allocation plan before the release of funding.

(f) (1) For each four-year plan cycle, the chancellor's office shall determine the amount of funds to be allocated to each consortium based on the following weighted factors in each region:

(A) The unemployment rate. This factor shall comprise 33 percent of the allocation formula.

(B) The proportion of career technical education full-time equivalent students. This factor shall comprise 33 percent of the allocation formula.

(C) The proportion of projected job openings. This factor shall comprise 17 percent of the allocation formula.

(D) The proportion of successful workforce outcomes as evidenced by the performance accountability measures of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128). This factor shall comprise 17 percent of the allocation formula.

(2) For each four-year plan cycle, the chancellor's office shall determine the amount of funds to be allocated directly to each community college district within a consortium based on the weighted factors, specified in subparagraphs (A) to (D), inclusive, of paragraph (1), in each district within the region.

(g) A consortium shall allocate funds in accordance with its plan and only to community college districts. Decisions governing, or relating to, the distribution of the consortium's fiscal resources shall be determined exclusively by the community college districts participating in the consortium.

(h) As a condition of receipt of funds under this section, a participating community college district shall comply with all of the following:

(1) Be a member of a consortium.

(2) Participate in regional planning efforts formed pursuant to the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128) and other efforts that align workforce, employment, and education services.

(3) Work with other consortium members to create and submit a plan to the chancellor's office by January 31 of every fourth year of a four-year plan cycle.

(4) Provide accessible performance and labor market data that can be used by community college districts and their regional partners to support the implementation of the program and any related efforts to align regional workforce and education programming with regional labor market needs, including, but not limited to, regional planning efforts established pursuant to the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128).

(5) Include interested public universities and local educational agencies in regional planning.

(6) Certify that the use of funds will meet the intent of the program to accomplish all of the following:

(A) Increase the number of students in quality career technical education courses, programs, and pathways that will achieve successful workforce outcomes.

(B) Increase the number of quality career technical education courses, programs, and pathways that lead to successful workforce outcomes, or invest in new or emerging career technical education courses, programs, and pathways that may become operative in subsequent years and are likely to lead to successful workforce outcomes.

(C) Address recommendations from the Strong Workforce Task Force, including the recommended provision of student services related to career exploration, job readiness and job placement, and work-based learning.

(i) Funds appropriated to community college districts for the program shall supplement, not supplant, existing funding of community college career technical education programs. This subdivision does not prohibit a participating community college district from eliminating or altering existing programs, but the percentage of that community college district's total full-time equivalent students enrolled in career technical education courses relative to the total full-time equivalent students enrolled in the district shall not be reduced from the percentage computed for the 2015–16 fiscal year.

(j) Programs, courses, or instructional materials developed using funding from the program may be made available to all community college districts, as appropriate, through the online clearinghouse of information created as part of the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative.