

A blurred background image showing a group of people in a meeting or conference room. In the foreground, a woman with dark curly hair is seen from the side, looking towards the right. She is wearing a dark blazer and a small earring. The background shows other people seated at tables, some looking at documents or devices.

HOW TO LEAD SYSTEMS CHANGE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Developing 6 Qualities of Effective
Cross-Sector Leadership

AT A GLANCE

Strong leaders are the key to unifying multiple competing efforts to increase student success. This brief examines how to develop the leadership qualities that helped transform loose collections of programs in California into high-performing regional systems.

AUTHORS

Marty Alvarado
Senior Director, JFF

Joel Vargas
Vice President, JFF

FEBRUARY 2019



INTRODUCTION

State reforms and philanthropic investments seeking to improve public education in California have made substantial changes in recent years—from what students learn and how they learn it to how schools are funded and evaluated. Most efforts have focused on one level at a time, either K-12 schools, community colleges, or four-year postsecondary institutions, as each of these state systems is vast and complex, with completely separate funding and governance.

But while recent reforms have affected every phase of a student's education from kindergarten to college, this fragmented approach has resulted in little progress toward what many consider the ultimate goal: creating smoother transitions from one level to the next to help more young people complete high school on time, attain a postsecondary credential with labor market value, and succeed in the workforce.

The James Irvine Foundation, in partnership with JFF, set out to address this problem in 2015 through creation of the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence (*see box “About” on page 4*). The goal, over three years, was to dramatically increase the number of California graduates from innovative pathways that blend high school, college, and career.

A second, more important goal came into focus once the work began, as multiple regional partnerships, including the Hubs, were competing for limited resources and sometimes working at cross purposes. JFF and the foundation recognized that before the initial goal could be achieved, the regions needed support to transform all of the disparate programs into collaborative systems aimed at improving regional student outcomes.

Building strong leadership for these regional systems was an immediate priority and immense challenge. Each Hub leader needed to develop a regional infrastructure for collaboration that would transcend individual programs and foster greater impact. The leaders' experiences have provided lessons about how leadership can advance systems change in California—and, potentially, in other parts of the country.

This brief examines the actions and attitudes that Hub leaders believe contributed most to their success. It is based on individual interviews with 11 leaders.¹ JFF selected them for their demonstration of characteristics of effective systems leadership, their length of time with the Hub, and their ability to infuse systems thinking into their regional collaborative.

JFF on Educational Systems Change in California

This is one of two briefs summarizing lessons learned in the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence about improving student success in high school, college, and careers through systems change in California.

This brief, *How to Lead Systems Change for Student Success: Developing 6 Qualities of Effective Cross-Sector Leadership*, zeroes in on lessons learned about effective leadership for systems change.

The other brief, *What It Takes to Increase Student Success through Systems Change: Lessons from the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence*, describes how the Hubs strengthened regional cross-sector partnerships and implemented key elements of systems change.²

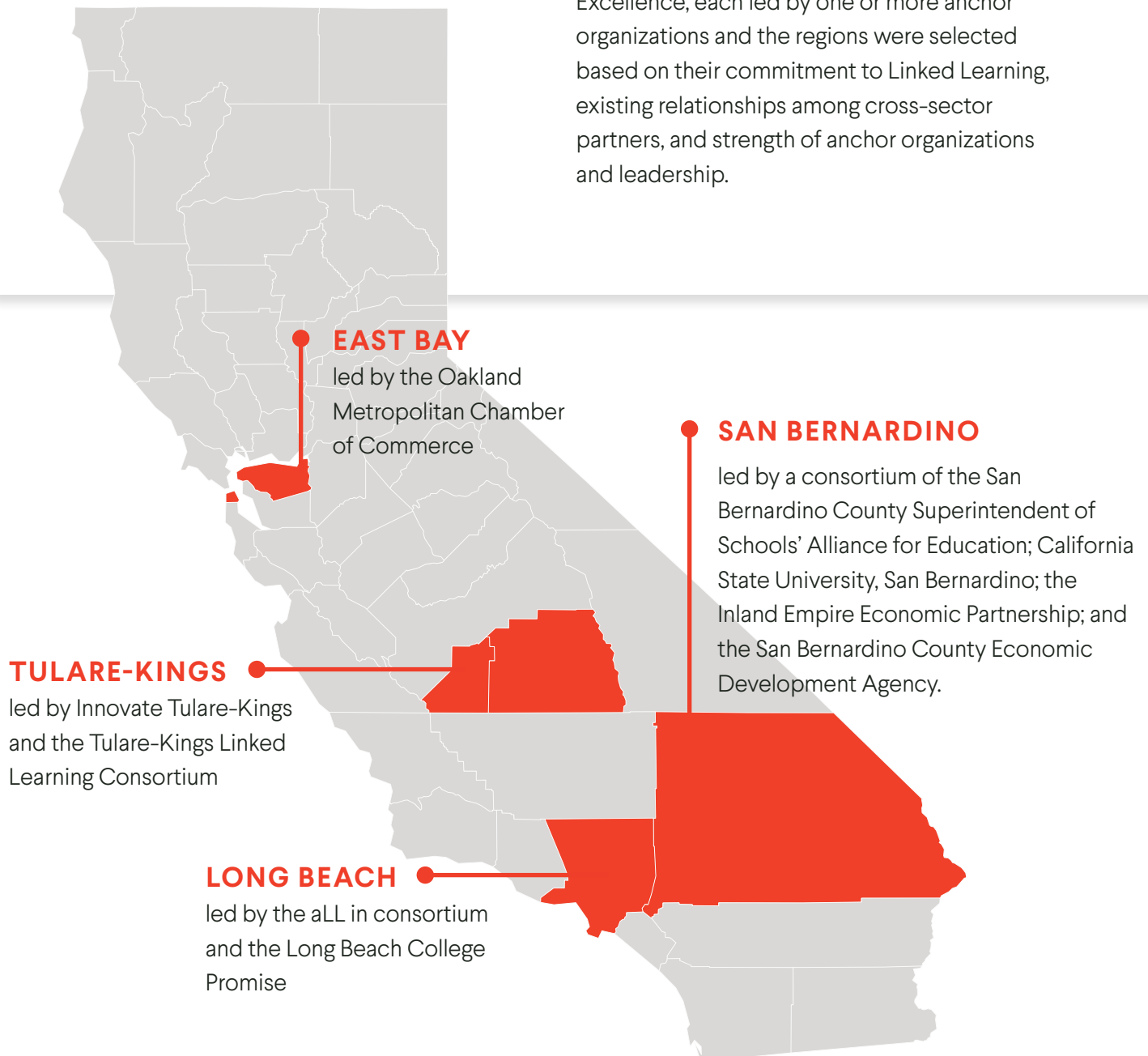
About Linked Learning

Linked Learning is a proven approach that creates high-quality career pathways to make high school relevant for students and prepare them for college. It integrates four key components: rigorous academics, career and technical education, work-based learning, and comprehensive support services to address the unique needs of individual students and ensure equity.

About the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence

The goal of the three-year California initiative was to increase at a substantial and sustainable scale the number of graduates from pathways that blend high school, college, and career. The James Irvine Foundation funded the effort and engaged JFF to design and manage the initiative, serving as the foundation's intermediary and leading technical assistance with grantees.

Four sites were selected as Regional Hubs of Excellence, each led by one or more anchor organizations and the regions were selected based on their commitment to Linked Learning, existing relationships among cross-sector partners, and strength of anchor organizations and leadership.



DEFINING SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

“Systems leadership” refers to leadership across organizational or systemic boundaries, intended to bring about systems change. Systems leaders differ from organizational leaders in that they rarely have authority over the systems or networks of stakeholders they are working to influence. Yet they find ways to cultivate collective action toward common regional goals.

Research on systems leadership focuses on the many characteristics that effective leaders employ in their efforts to advance cross-sector, partnership-based strategies. Interviews for this brief were based on a leadership framework developed by the evaluation team for the Hubs initiative. The framework identifies nine characteristics of effective systems leaders, organized into dispositions, skills, and ways of working.³ They are:

Dispositions



Systems thinking Understand nuance while maintaining the big picture and seeing the dynamics inherent within complex systems



Open mindset Embrace learning, ambiguity, risk, and experimentation



Unwavering attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion Keep diversity, equity, and inclusion at the center of one’s work

Skills



Relationships and trust Create productive working relationships and facilitate shared trust among multiple stakeholders



Effective communication Hear points of view different from one’s own and craft unifying narratives that are meaningful for all stakeholders



A focus on results Help others stay focused on the intended results and impact

Ways of working



Co-creation of structures to support the work Collaborate with partners and stakeholders to develop processes and structures that facilitate joint work



Empowerment Promote the collective, rather than the individual, as the unit of influence



Incentives and payoffs Create opportunities for individuals at multiple levels of the system to see benefits of their participation in the short term and long term

These characteristics are to be considered aspirational. Few leaders begin their roles with all of these dispositions, skills, or ways of thinking. Rather, strong leaders develop these qualities over time, through many years of experiences, mistakes, self-reflection, refinement, support, and improvement.

**Strong leaders
develop key
qualities
through years
of experience,
mistakes,
reflection,
support, &
improvement.**

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE SYSTEMS LEADER?

JFF interviewed 11 Hub leaders to determine how they have grown as systems leaders in the course of the initiative, centering our inquiry on the above nine characteristics. The leaders shared their experiences, challenges, and successes in advancing systems change both during the Hubs project and in previous roles.

In the Hubs initiative, leaders helped connect efforts across K-12 school districts, postsecondary institutions, workforce development organizations, and employers, incorporating involvement of community-based organizations and policymakers. Leaders were coached to target five key elements of systems change in their regions in order to achieve the long-term goals of increasing Linked Learning pathways and student success. The elements, based on a framework borrowed from supportive housing efforts, are: power, money, habits, skills or technology, and ideas or values.⁴

Six common themes emerged from the interviews that demonstrate lessons learned about how to be effective leaders and how to develop crucial qualities of effective systems leadership. We found that effective leaders:

- 1 Build relationships over time, across initiatives, and across sectors;
- 2 Are patient, reflective, and adaptive, and make changes for continuous improvement;
- 3 Effectively communicate progress and build a collective narrative;
- 4 Understand and acknowledge the pressures that stakeholders experience in different sectors, organizations, and institutions;
- 5 Establish layered leadership and empower leaders at every level, prioritizing close communication between them; and
- 6 Plan for sustained systems change.

In the following sections, we examine each of the above lessons.

SYSTEMS LEADERS...

1 build relationships over time, across initiatives, and across sectors

The importance of relationships is a central theme in research on leadership and collaboration, and it is a theme that resonated deeply with leaders of the four regional Hubs. Leaders we interviewed acknowledged that working collaboratively requires trust and shared interest among stakeholders. Genuine connections come from spending time together, they said, not just from exchanging phone calls or emails.

Strong relationships enable partners to work together in new ways, which, in turn, strengthen trust, leaders said. For example, trust increases when partners share information, mutually create agendas, and hold each other accountable on action items.

One Hub leader came to better understand that relationships between people, even from organizations that have partnered historically, need to be nurtured. She said she learned it's important not to assume that things automatically will go the same way they have in the past. Further, she said, a culture of trust between organizations must be developed and sustained as much as trust between individuals from those organizations.

Leaders noted that establishing these relationships over time and maintaining connections across sectors and initiatives is an essential part of what allows them to activate systems change. “We’ve been in these roles in a collaborative nature for many years,” one Hub leader said.⁵ “The initiatives may change, but the relationships have stayed.”

Hub leaders used their relationships to understand the objectives of varied initiatives and to envision how they might fit together as shared regional goals. They acted as connectors, introducing people across sectors in their regions and facilitating idea sharing. They also infused concepts of systems thinking through their service on other regional cross-sector efforts.

“I have the relationships that I need to really actualize Linked Learning,” one leader said. “My hope is that we have enough trust . . . and institutional alignment of our goals . . . that we’ll continue to partner even when the money goes away.”



SYSTEMS LEADERS...

2 are patient, reflective, and adaptive, and make changes for continuous improvement

Systems leaders know that making progress in systems change takes time. Hub leaders acknowledged the importance of being not only patient, but also reflective and adaptive, leaving space for continuous improvement.

Exemplifying adaptive leadership, one leader noted the importance of “being patient enough and listening enough” to figure out the intricacies of each system and all the parts in need of attention.

Rather than rushing to provide formulaic solutions when facing barriers to progress, several Hub leaders said, they learned to figure out first which specific components of the system were contributing to the problem. Such a detailed understanding of the issues enabled more customized solutions. The leaders gained confidence by taking this analytical, systems-based approach to challenges.

Hub leaders also learned that taking the time to be thoughtful and methodical has other advantages, such as reducing unnecessary work in the long run and building trust among partners. For example, a common organizational response to a problem is creating a workgroup to address it, even though other, less labor-intensive approaches can be more effective.

Patience enables systems leaders to distinguish between where change requires disruption and where adapting their model is called for. One Hub leader said, “We . . . just keep trying to figure out, ‘Is this the right way to do the work?’” With a big-picture lens, Hub leaders identified the battles worth waging and the ones to let go.

**Leaders
identified the
battles worth
waging and the
ones to let go.**

All were willing to revise their goals and models. “It’s important to constantly be assessing and then willing to adapt structure based on need, so the structure then doesn’t become the thing that’s preventing you from success,” one leader said.

For example, San Bernardino Hub leaders recognized that the way they structured their regional oversight was not “changing the way we thought, changing the way we interacted, changing the system of it. It was just same old, same old.” So, they took a different, innovative approach, testing various solutions such as changing or adding anchor organizations to include new sectors, which increased engagement and a sense of shared ownership. They also changed workgroup structures, modified meeting schedules, and improved ways of communicating.

One leader described the resulting improvements: “I see people getting a lot more comfortable being able to talk in constructive ways, even when things don’t go exactly as we might have hoped, and using a process of invention and innovation and iteration.”

SYSTEMS LEADERS...

3

effectively communicate progress and build a collective narrative

Moving patiently, and then reflecting and adapting, has also enabled Hub leaders to communicate more effectively by targeting the right audiences with the right information. For example, several improved their communication efforts by explaining the broad purpose and intent of the regional coalition, beyond the implementation of Linked Learning, in a way that resonated for all stakeholders.

Others found value in building a collective narrative for the region—narratives that usually focused on students and equity. One leader emphasized the importance of moving beyond the narratives of the individual organizations represented and creating a narrative that demonstrates “how we’re working together and why it’s important, and the outcomes that we’re achieving through it.”

This particularly resonated in the San Bernardino Hub, where the regional leaders said that learning to communicate progress to the executive leaders who were removed from the day-to-day work—such as the school district superintendents and college presidents—contributed to the program’s success. “I think we got more

**Stakeholders
found value
in building
a collective
narrative for
the region—
narratives that
usually focused
on students
and equity.**

buy-in later in the initiative as we got better about explaining what it was, what we could do together, and how individuals could plug into what was being created,” one leader said.

And in Long Beach, leaders started to generate more regional interest and participation when they opted to rename the Hub “aLL in.” By including new partners beyond those involved in the pre-existing Long Beach College Promise initiative, they helped everyone see their role in the collaborative and developed a new, shared identity.

As trust increased, Hub leaders were able to infuse data more effectively into their communications. As one leader said, “it can stir things up,” but it also can be “neutralizing” and helpful because it provides an objective assessment of “where we need to better ourselves, or where we’re doing really well.” The leader added that using data has helped to depersonalize communications and “made it more about the work.”

Most Hub leaders said that becoming more effective communicators involved two lessons. First, they learned to translate the initiative’s value to its wide variety of stakeholders by listening closely and becoming fluent in their needs. Doing that enabled them to show a range of stakeholders that their individual objectives could be achieved in the pursuit of system goals.

Second, they created inclusive, nuanced narratives about the initiative. Rather than perpetuating divides by sending different messages to different groups, such as business and education, they developed narratives that connect sectors around common goals and efforts.

All Hub leaders acknowledged the importance of knowing the incentives and payoffs for various stakeholders and building a narrative that speaks to “what’s in it for them.” They took

time to ascertain the goals of their regional participants so that they could express how a system would help them succeed. One leader stressed that it's important to help all stakeholders recognize the potential benefits, "because it's not always obvious."

In Tulare-Kings, the regional leaders commissioned focus groups for a variety of stakeholders. The focus groups helped the leaders identify potential value propositions for different stakeholders and any assumptions or biases they had about Linked Learning. This helped the region craft clearer narratives. Leaders learned when they needed to dispel myths about Linked Learning and when leading with the Linked Learning brand, which was associated with school districts selected for grant funding, would limit a sense of shared purpose with postsecondary and business partners.

SYSTEMS LEADERS...

4 understand and acknowledge the pressures that stakeholders experience in different sectors, organizations, and institutions

Hub leaders understood that stakeholders experience influences and pressures unique to their individual sectors, organizations, and campuses.

Several mentioned that experience working on other initiatives or serving on state-level committees can make leaders less myopic in their approach to cross-sector work. These experiences enabled leaders to be more empathetic to constraints facing participants, such as new legislation or funding reductions that may shift priorities mid-initiative.

Hub leaders helped participants hold the big-picture vision of creating an effective, complex system while leaving space for organizational priorities. They understood that sometimes the needs of a stakeholder's organization would come first, but always sought common ground among varying agendas.

As one leader said, it is important to "make sure that everything we're doing ties back to some outcome that each stakeholder cares about."

Understanding organizational contexts also helped leaders identify and mitigate barriers to participation and helped them recognize the need for greater diversity and advocate for it. For example, East Bay leaders, seeing that their Hub was industry-centric, pushed to make connections with education stakeholders; San Bernardino leaders felt the need to move in the opposite direction. In each, leaders saw the need to better balance the representation in the initiative.

SYSTEMS LEADERS...

5 build trust, understanding, and buy-in with executive leaders

Several leaders said that, at times, there were disconnects between executive leaders and mid-level leaders in workgroups. In response, they created new ways for everyone to work together. One leader said, “The operational leader needs to be directly connected to that executive-level leader, so that there’s clear communication about what’s happening, what’s not happening, what is needed in terms of resources. Trying to do that through a third person does not work very well.”

Hub leaders also helped support executive leaders by translating for them how the Hub work contributed to the outcomes of their respective organizations. This increased executives’ buy-in of the Hub work and kept partners engaged.

Hub leaders recognized the constraints and pressures that executives faced—“[they are] responsible for shepherding the public image of their organization,” one leader said. While many stakeholders might see the benefit in working as a system, executives face different pressures on behalf of their organizations.

Another leader said, “We have to be mindful of the fact that many [executives] are elected or appointed into positions that require them to continuously forward [their own] organization.” By being open-minded and empathetic about these constraints, Hub leaders were better able to get decision makers to attend important meetings, which was necessary to make significant systems-level changes or to get stakeholders at all levels the resources they needed.

Leaders encouraged stakeholders to recognize how achieving system goals would benefit program goals.

Hub leaders also encouraged systems thinking by helping stakeholders understand how achieving system goals would benefit program goals. As one leader said, “It’s been really important to align and help people recognize, ‘If we change the system in this way, it could have this benefit for you at the program level.’”

SYSTEMS LEADERS...

6 plan for sustained systems change

Every Hub leader now is looking ahead to sustaining the systems change work in their regions. As discussed in the companion paper, *What It Takes to Increase Student Success through Systems Change: Lessons from the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence*, the Hubs have impacted elements of systems change—money, power, habits, ideas, and skills—

so that the nodes of activity will remain connected and productive beyond this funded initiative.

Going forward, one leader said, systems change will require more defined roles for all regional players, including postsecondary education. “It’s great that we’re at the table, but if we don’t know exactly what it is that we’re contributing, then it becomes rather challenging for us to be a systems leader,” he said.

Several leaders mentioned that staff turnover had hindered progress because it affects trust and relationships, and slows decision making. To address this, Hub leaders are focusing on developing better onboarding/off-boarding processes, and also on codifying the expectations for new leaders moving into regional, cross-sector roles.

Going forward, systems change will require better defined roles for all regional players.



Cross-sector systems leaders play a critical role in bridging the divides among initiatives, systems, sectors, and regions in California. To help elevate the characteristics that make leaders successful, regional stakeholders can take steps such as:

- Providing professional development to help leaders build and strengthen these qualities;
- Rewriting position descriptions so that expectations for leaders are clear and include cross-sector leadership skills;
- Adjusting expectations to include learning from short-term progress, giving leaders space to work toward long-term systemic goals; and
- Elevating and funding cross-sector leadership roles, making impact explicitly connected to the organizations' agendas.

In the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence, leaders expanded the potential of Linked Learning pathways by building relationships and trust; establishing habits of collaboration, co-creation, and decision making; developing and empowering new leaders; creating mechanisms for communication; and involving stakeholders in the development of collective goals. They evolved along the way and are already applying lessons to new roles with a personal commitment to improving the lives of youth in their communities.

ENDNOTES

1. See acknowledgements for a list of those interviewed.
2. Marty Alvarado and Joel Vargas, *What It Takes to Increase Student Success through Systems Change: Lessons from the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence* (Boston: JFF, 2019).
3. *Cultivating Systems Leadership in Cross-Sector Partnerships: Lessons from the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence* (Harder+Company and Equal Measure, 2017).
4. Debbie Greiff, Tony Proscio, and Carol Wilkins, *Laying a New Foundation: Changing the Systems that Create and Sustain Supportive Housing* (New York: Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2003), http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Report_LayingANewFoundation.pdf.
5. JFF agreed not to attribute any comments from the interviews to the individuals who made them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication was made possible through generous support from the James Irvine Foundation.

The authors are grateful to the 11 leaders of the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence who agreed to be interviewed for this brief: Cindy Bater, Simon Kim, and Amy Smith of Long Beach; Jennie Bautista, Kris Costa, Joy Soares, and Randy Wallace of Tulare-Kings; Jay Fiene and Debra Mustain of San Bernardino; and Rebecca Lacocque and Courtney Riley of East Bay. We appreciate their candor about their experiences and their participation in our collective journey to advance systems change to improve student success in California. Thank you to the three JFF coaches for the Hubs—Tobie Baker Wright, Ana Gutierrez, and Renee Faulkner—for their boundless hard work and commitment to the cause. Special thanks are due to consultant Jodi Lewis who did much of the research for this brief and helped us to articulate many of its themes. Thanks are due as well to the Hubs evaluation team of Equal Measure and Harder+Company.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marty Alvarado

As senior director of cross-sector networks, Marty J. Alvarado focuses on building a community of regional ecosystems designed to support regional economic advancement for all across the state of California. Prior to joining JFF in 2015, Ms. Alvarado led a range of workforce development initiatives serving both youth and adults within the California community college system. With more than 15 years of experience in higher education, she brings expertise in program development and implementation, community engagement and partnerships, industry engagement and work-based learning, grant and fund development, and cross-sector systems change. She received a bachelor's degree from Whittier College in Whittier, California, and a master's in philosophy and cultural analysis from the Universiteit van Amsterdam, located in the Netherlands.

Joel Vargas

Joel Vargas, EdD, leads the work of JFF's west coast office in Oakland, California, as well as the work of staff nationally focused on improving education and workforce outcomes for low-income youth. He has helped policymakers and intermediaries develop state and federal policies that integrate college and career experiences into high school, and developed strategies to support regional networks that promote conditions for improving economic advancement and learning. He has designed and implemented research and state policy agendas; created policy frameworks, tools, and model legislation; written and edited white papers, research, and national publications; provided technical assistance to state task forces and policy working groups; served national advisory groups; and organized and presented at national conferences. Joel received a bachelor's degree in journalism from Boston University, and a master's and doctoral degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.



88 Broad St., 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110

122 C St., NW, Suite 280, Washington, DC 20001

505 14th St., Suite 340, Oakland, CA 94612

TEL 617.728.4446 **WEB** www.jff.org