

Date of Hearing: March 18, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Mike Fong, Chair

AB 323 (Fong) – As Introduced January 24, 2025

**SUBJECT:** Strong Workforce Program: work-based learning opportunities

**SUMMARY:** Requires the California Community College (CCC) Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) to revise, no later than June 30, 2026, any Strong Workforce Program policies, regulations, and guidance necessary to provide students, employers, or both, with paid work-based learning opportunities. Authorize a community college district (CCD) to also use Strong Workforce Program funds apportioned directly to CCDs to provide direct support to students, employers, or both, for paid work-based learning to increase employability and employment. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires that, no later than June 30, 2026, the CCCCCO must 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 CCD pursuant to the community college component of the Strong Workforce Program.
- 2) Specifies that funds apportioned directly to a CCD may be used to provide 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.
- 3) Makes non-substantive technical changes.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Establishes the CCC under the administration of the Board of Governors of the CCC, as one of the segments of public postsecondary education in this state. The CCC is comprised of community college districts (CCD). (Education Code (EDC) Section 70900).
- 2) Creates for each CCD a board of trustees, known as the governing board, and authorizes the governing board to establish, maintain, operate, and govern each CCC within their district in accordance with state and federal law, as specified. The governing board may initiate and carry on any program, activity, or may otherwise act in any manner that is not in conflict or inconsistent with any law and that is not in conflict with the purpose of a CCD, as specified. (EDC Section 70902).
- 3) Establishes the Strong Workforce Program 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. Establishes the Strong Workforce Program Consortia comprised of Local Educational Agencies (LEA), CCDs, and other entities who collaborate with local and regional governments, and industry partners to meet the career technical educational workforce needs of a given region. Funds are allocated to consortia members with a specified

amount to CCDs and a specified amount to K-12 partners. Requires the CCCCCO to, no later than June 30, 2017, bring before the CCC Board of Governors any policies, regulations, and guidance necessary to accomplish, among other things, provide work-based learning opportunities for students that increase their employability and earning potential, as provided. Additionally requires a percentage of the funds apportioned for community colleges under the program to be apportioned directly to CCDs in the consortia to fund, among other things, student grants to cover fees for third-party certification and licensing. Funding must be used as specified for career technical education programs. (EDC Section 88820 et seq.).

**FISCAL EFFECT:** Unknown

**COMMENTS:** *Purpose.* According to the author, “In 2016, California took a bold step in establishing the Strong Workforce Program in order to develop more workforce opportunities and lift low-wage workers into living-wage jobs. An initial \$200 million was allocated to the Strong Workforce Program to expand career technical education CTE in California’s community colleges. Since the program began, Strong Workforce Program has shown positive gains in noncredit student progress, credential attainment and transfer, employment, and earnings outcomes.”

“Paid internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based experiences are critical in bridging academics with hands-on experience in a student’s career choice. However, it is unclear whether SWP funds can be used for this purpose. AB 323 makes it clear that funds may be used to provide support to students, employers, or both, for paid work-based learning, which will increase employability of students and provide opportunities for long-term employment.”

*Career technical education (CTE).* According to the California’s 2020-23 Unified Strategic Workforce Development Plan published by the California Workforce Development Board, middle-skill occupations or jobs which require more than a high school education, but less than a four-year degree are expected to generate 162,460 average annual job openings between 2016 and 2026. Middle-skilled occupations include bookkeepers, truck drivers, nursing assistances, automotive mechanics, telecommunications equipment installers, computer network support specialists, and medical assistants. A 2018 publication by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), determined should workforce data trends continue, a third of new jobs in California would require some form of CTE.

CCCs are the only California public higher education institution tasked with offering vocational education in the Education Code as well as the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education. The CCC offers CTE programs to prepare students for professional-level employment opportunities in an array of fields including courses in fire technology, mechatronics, fashion, and welding. In the 2023-24 academic year, the CCC awarded 140,314 vocational certificates according to the Chancellor’s Office Management Information Systems Data Mart.

While four-year diplomas are often heralded as the ticket out of poverty, many CTE credentials lead to wage gains and benefits. Recognizing the value of short-term certificates and CTE, the state and federal governments have provided funding for increased CTE programs at both the K-12 and higher education levels.

*Strong Workforce Program.* The Strong Workforce Program was established in the annual Budget Act in 2016. The program was originally a recommendation from the CCC Board of Governors and was adopted by the Legislature and the Governor in order to create one million more middle-skill or CTE workers to meet workforce demands. The original allocation for the Strong Workforce Program was \$248 million and was reserved for student success, career pathways, workforce data outcomes, CTE faculty, and regional coordination. Funding for community colleges is dispersed with 60% being given to each community college district, and 40% to regional consortia for distribution in order to focus on the workforce needs of the state's eight regions: Far North, Bay Area, Central/Motherlode, South Central Coast, Los Angeles, Orange County, Inland Empire/Desert, and San Diego/Imperial. In 2018, the annual Budget Act expanded the Strong Workforce Program to include a K-12 LEAs.

According to the CCCCCO's 2022-2023 Strong Workforce report, the Strong Workforce Program has "provided more than \$1 billion in funding to the California Community Colleges in support of the creation and expansion of high-quality CTE programs that lead to living-wage jobs. This funding supports the goals of initiatives like the Vision 2030 and Governor Newsom's Roadmap for California Community Colleges, which aim to improve student success, reduce achievement and equity gaps and develop a skilled workforce in California. College districts and regional consortia invested Strong Workforce funding across a range of industry sectors identified as local priorities. Types of investments included upgrading current programs, establishing new programs leading to well-paying jobs in high-demand occupations, creating pathways to and from other education and training systems and strengthening connections with employers"

*Arguments in support.* Los Angeles Community College District, a co-sponsor of AB 323, wrote that "While the funding is meant to provide students with work-based learning opportunities, current law does not explicitly authorize colleges and districts to utilize the funding to partner with industry to provide internships in areas that increase employment opportunities for the students. Additionally, current state guidance indicates that districts cannot utilize the funding for this purpose. Consequently, plans that include work-based learning stipends as a part of the spending plan have been rejected."

"In the community college system, paid internships and work-based learning, more broadly, serve as an important bridge between academic programs and the world of work. They are critical tools that enable colleges to serve students from special populations who often experience equity gaps in completion and employment. This is consistent with a focus on living wages and enrollment in employment. Additionally, the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) has conducted studies indicating that unpaid internships disproportionately affect underrepresented students, particularly Black and Latino individuals who often cannot afford to work without compensation. Your AB 323, would significantly alleviate the financial burden faced by low-income students. This financial barrier limits student access to valuable work-based learning experiences, exacerbating existing equity gaps in education and employment."

The Student Senate for the California Community Colleges (SSCCC) also wrote in support, noting that "We believe AB 323 would support community college students in accessing critical job opportunities and improving their employability. SWP is a unique program to strengthen [CTE] in California's Community Colleges, encouraging collaboration between educational institutions and local employers through regional consortia. According to the [CCCCO], in 2021-22 nearly 80,000 SWP students obtained credentials and have successfully transferred to a four-

year institution. The percentage of students obtaining jobs closely related to their field of study has also remained high, ranging from 72% to 73% over the program's duration, demonstrating that CTE programs are adequately preparing students for training-related employment.”

## **REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

### **Support**

Antelope Valley Community College District  
California Chamber of Commerce  
Compton Community College District  
Contra Costa Community College District  
El Camino Community College District  
Faculty Association of California Community Colleges  
Foothill-de Anza Community College District  
Kern Community College District  
Los Angeles Community College District  
Los Rios Community College District  
Miracosta Community College District  
Mt. San Antonio College  
Mt. San Jacinto Community College District  
North Orange County Community College District  
Pasadena Area Community College District  
San Bernardino Community College District  
San Diego Community College District  
San Diego Mesa College  
San Jose-evergreen Community College District  
Santa Monica Community College District (UNREG)  
South Orange County Community College District  
Southwestern Community College District  
Southwestern Community College District (UNREG)  
State Center Community College District  
Student Senate for California Community Colleges  
Vision Y Compromiso

### **Opposition**

None on file.

**Analysis Prepared by:** Kevin J. Powers / HIGHER ED. / (916) 319-3960