Sharing a story about one of his constituents, West Virginia state Sen. John Unger told the audience at a recent CSG Policy Academy on Innovative Delivery Models in Postsecondary Education that a young mother told him, “I have three jobs and two children. I don’t need another job; I need a good job.”

“To maintain America’s competitiveness, we must look at increasing education and job training from high school and beyond,” Unger said.

Many education officials are turning to the business community to spark conversation about regional hiring needs, deficits in worker skills and the training necessary to allow for family-sustaining wages and for continued industry growth.

“We have serious issues of how we educate our children and prepare them for the workforce,” said Kathryn Regjo, vice president of the Vail-Eagle Valley Campus of Colorado Mountain College in Edwards, Colo. Regjo shared how their local community built “relentless collaboration among critical partners” to develop a cradle-to-career approach for local jobs based on identified industry needs.

During the 2014-15 school year, nearly 60 percent of students at Battle Mountain and Eagle County high schools were enrolled in at least one credit-bearing course at the community college, all at no cost to the student with the exception of textbooks and essential materials.

“Our goal is to prepare our students to enter the workforce and make a living,” said Mike Trujillo, director of the health science and public safety programs at the Edwards campus. “To do that, we must have partnerships between K-12, postsecondary education, workforce job centers and business.”

California also has formed collaborative partnerships among education and business stakeholders to develop and expand career pathways in the state.

In 2013, the California Department of Education created the California Career Pathways Trust, a program designed to prepare students for college and careers by connecting employers to students and providing training for students in high-demand fields. Funding from the trust allows local school districts, county education offices, charter schools and community college districts to apply for a one-time grant of up to $15 million.

The trust was allocated $250 million by the California State Legislature, proposed by former Senate President Pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg, as a designated portion of the state’s K-14 education
budget. The primary goal of these grants is to effectively create long-lasting partnerships between local businesses and K-12 and community college students.

Following the March 2014 application deadline, state officials received more than 120 applications requesting about $700 million in grant funding, nearly triple the program’s allocated budget. Successful applicants targeted high-need industries—ranging from medical technology and engineering to information and digital media—and began partnering with companies such as Time Warner, Boeing, Tyson Foods, Southern California Gas and Bayer.

Because of the high demand from educational institutions, the program and its $250 million in available funding has been renewed for a second year.

Eight school districts throughout the state also will share an additional $4.2 million in planning grants to establish a career pathways program in the future. Joe Radding, manager of the California Career Pathways Trust, said the purpose of these planning grants is to assist interested groups in examining the feasibility of creating local and regional consortia in their areas and ultimately, establishing one or more career pathways.

Radding said creating career pathways programs is a high priority for state policymakers.

“Our legislature gave $500 million for schools, community colleges and their business partners to create pathways to careers in high-skill, high-wage and high-growth economic sectors,” Radding said.

Applicants and grantees are expected to maintain strong partnerships, align career pathways to workforce development needs and collaboratively define goals and set targets for success. Additional requirements include identifying and addressing barriers to success, engaging in local and regional capacity building and committing to long-term sustainability.

Radding said the innovative nature of the trust allows grantees to “figure it out” with more autonomy at the local and regional levels. The state sets high-level program goals, but allows grantees to decide which industry sectors to target and which career pathways to implement. All activities are focused on those programs and strategies needed to meet the workforce development needs of business and industry.

During the first year of each grant, 20 percent of the total award is used to explore local workforce issues by consulting business leaders, and understand how the creation of career pathways can help address workforce deficiencies. The remaining 80 percent is to begin implementing one or more career pathways.

In May 2015, the trust awarded another $244 million in grants to 40 recipients and gained Intel, Qualcomm and the Port of Los Angeles, among other companies, as business partners. Schools in San Jose, San Francisco, Fresno, Irvine and San Diego were selected as grant recipients. In addition to medical and technological fields, schools have devoted their grant resources to focus on training and building networks with businesses related to advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and plant and animal science.

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