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## AJ Thomas: 'Linked learning' will help ensure employers can find skilled workers

By **AJ Thomas**  
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As a human resources professional for a high-tech company, I am responsible for screening applicants for jobs in an industry that is growing ever more competitive.

Potential hires need more than a solid education; they need work-ready skills and experience. Unfortunately, many candidates lack these prerequisites.

According to a new report from the business leaders organization America's Edge, even at the height of the recession and with 2 million Californians out of work, only 38 percent of the state's workers had appropriate training for 47 percent of California's jobs in middle-skill careers -- positions that require more than a high school diploma but not necessarily a four-year college degree.

What's worse is the lack of qualified workers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics -- the STEM occupations.

Only a few years ago California had one of the premier education systems in the country, but recently we have headed in the wrong direction.

New data show that approximately one in four California high school freshmen do not graduate in four years. An alarming 18 percent of students drop out of school altogether.

Fortunately, California has a promising approach to education reform that is gaining momentum. It is called linked learning, and it combines rigorous academics with relevant career-technical education and hands-on learning opportunities with regional employers, based on a proven

national model called career academies.

I have worked with students in the green and biotech academies at Andrew P. Hill High School in East San Jose. Having a program that infuses entrepreneurial education into this school allows students to exercise career-essential skills, including communication, collaboration and critical thinking.

Many of the students I've worked with did not see the relevance in traditional high school classes, but through career-themed academies they could connect their studies to the real world.

For example, last year the students spent eight months working in teams, researching data for their business plans, which culminated in a professional presentation to CEOs and venture capitalists in Silicon Valley.

Their business plans included creating solar power lockers and diabetic dessert food lines. These students had to compete for internships and

scholarships to further their education and gained an invaluable experience that will serve them well as they explore future careers.

Data on career academies show that participating students go on to work more hours and earn more money than nonparticipating students. Schools with linked learning programs have also shown significant increases in graduation rates and the number of students who enroll in postsecondary education.

The bottom line is clear: California must adopt policies that help expand these effective programs. Three bills awaiting Gov. Jerry Brown's signature would do just that.

Senate Bill 547 would replace the Academic Performance Index, which judges a school's performance solely using test scores, with a new, more comprehensive performance measure called the Education Quality Index. The Education Quality Index would be comprised of several indexes, including a career-readiness index.

SB 611 would establish the University of California Curriculum Integration Institute to bring together high school teachers, university researchers and other experts to develop courses with rigorous academic content linked to real-world applications. SB 612 would expand a proven professional development program that prepares teachers to deliver hands-on, integrated curriculum that is connected to high-need sectors of the economy.

Traditional methods of teaching in high schools are outdated and ineffective. It is time to embrace an education model that will infuse education with relevance and provide the kind of work-readiness skills that students want and employers need.



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AJ THOMAS is a human resources manager for Infinera Corp. in Sunnyvale. She wrote this for this newspaper.

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