

California's Golden Opportunity

Taking Stock: Leadership from the Middle

Michael Fullan and Santiago Rincón-Gallardo

September 2017



MOTION
LEADERSHIP

MICHAELFULLAN.CA

This is the fourth in a series of informal feedback reports on the evolution of California’s education reform enacted by Governor Jerry Brown and the legislature in 2013-2014. California radically redefined its policy direction in education, embracing what State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Torlakson, calls *The California Way* (see Note at the end of the document). The new education policy approach is based on the principle of subsidiarity—decentralization of resources to local levels—and is expressed in the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), along with an associated requirement that districts file a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).

As part of a grant from the Stuart Foundation, our team has been monitoring the evolution of LCFF from the outset. This report is organized into the following sections: A. The Broader Context of Whole System Reform; B. California’s Adoption of the Right Drivers; C. Methodology; D. Findings; and E. Recommendations.

A. The Broader Context of Whole System Reform

Our team has been actively ‘doing’ and studying system wide reform since 2003 when some of us had the opportunity to advise and help lead the transformation of education in the province of Ontario.¹ The Ontario story received widespread attention because it was successful, and because the strategy was explicitly defined and disseminated. In 2011, Fullan wrote a critique of system reform policies and strategies in a policy paper entitled: *Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform*.² A driver is a policy intending to improve student outcomes; a wrong driver is a policy that does not produce its intended outcomes. The set of wrong and right drivers are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Wrong and Right Drivers of Education Reform

Wrong Drivers	Right Drivers
Punitive Accountability	Capacity Building
Technology	Pedagogy
Individualistic Solutions	Collaboration
Ad Hoc Initiatives	Systemness

Thus, punitive and cumbersome accountability requirements, policies that focus on individualistic solutions, investing in technology, and ad hoc initiatives do not produce their intended outcomes and can even have a negative effect on performance. By contrast, the right combination of capacity building (increasing the skills and competencies of individuals and groups), teamwork, focusing on improving instruction, and fostering ‘systemness’ (coherence of policy and widespread involvement that engages people in understanding and connecting to the overall reform) has a higher chance of having a positive impact. In general, it is easier to pursue the wrong drivers (they can be *legislated*) than it is to embed the right drivers (they have to be *developed*). Thus, getting the right drivers ‘right’ is a challenge but can be accomplished as we have seen in Ontario.

¹ For a recent account of the ‘Ontario story’, see Fullan, M., & Rincón-Gallardo, S. (2016) “Developing High Quality Public Education in Canada: The Case of Ontario.” In Adamson, F., Astrand, B., & Darling-Hammond, L. (Eds.) *Global Education Reform: How Privatization and Public Investment Influence Education Outcomes*. New York: Routledge, pp.169-193.

² Fullan, M. (2011) *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform*. Seminar Series Paper No. 204. Victoria, AU: Centre for Strategic Education.

In broader terms, we continue to work on and learn about system change. In addition to Ontario and California, we work in several other Canadian provinces, in Queensland and Victoria in Australia, New Zealand, and we are frequent participants in the OECD PISA and related analyses. In so doing we continue to develop ideas for maximizing the success of whole system change. One approach that Fullan and Quinn (2016) have developed is the *Coherence Framework*.³ The four components of the framework, corresponding to each of the four right drivers are: focusing direction, collaborative cultures, deepening pedagogy and learning, and internal accountability. Another breakthrough, first identified by our colleague Andy Hargreaves, is the concept of *leadership from the middle* (LftM),⁴ which is particularly applicable to complex systems like California—more about *LftM* in a moment.

Our modus operandi is to team up with a system or large chunks of it, work and learn together, *then* write a book or article about it, do it better the next time, write another book, and so on. It is very much moving from practice to theory rather than the other way around. Our best ideas come from working with leading practitioners. California is no exception. The reason that our ideas connected with California was that many educators in the state were already working on the right drivers in the era of wrong driver policy; they were, so to speak, working under the radar and in effect were liberated by the policy shift represented by LCFF.

A little bit of *LftM* theory: Top down change doesn't work (wrong drivers don't foster intrinsic motivation), but neither does bottom up change add up (giving schools autonomy and leaving them alone is a recipe for greater inequity). The key is the middle—defined as the layers between the top (government), and the bottom (individual schools). Defining the middle in California is complicated because its education sector is so large and layered. For the purposes of this report, we define the *middle* as the 1000+ districts and *three key intermediary agencies* in California's education system: California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) and its 58 counties, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), and the California Department of Education (CDE).⁵ In a nutshell (and too abstractly for the moment), the roles of the top, the middle, and the bottom of an educational system are as follows: the top frames, the middle strengthens, and the bottom is liberated. In other words, given the opportunity, the middle is expected to get stronger and become a better partner upward to the state and downward to schools. Getting stronger means developing greater capacity to learn within its ranks—laterally, if you like—and in partnership up and down. In our *LftM* work we have also gleaned that any level should view the level above it as something to be exploited in the best sense of that concept. For example, it is not the districts' role to implement state policy literally but rather to leverage it for local purposes. Looking downward, the role of different levels is to liberate the levels below to engage in innovative and purposeful change, while providing supports and guidance as needed through ongoing cycles of action, reflection and refinement. In so doing, upper levels interact with but do not attempt to micromanage the level below them. The overall principle of action is: exploit upward, liberate and support downward. This

³ Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2016) *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

⁴ Fullan, M. (2015) "Leadership from the Middle: A System Strategy," Canadian Education Association, Dec. 2015, pp. 22-26.

Hargreaves, A., & Ainscow, M. (2015) "The Top and Bottom of Leadership and Change," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 97(3): 42-48.

⁵ School leaders (principals and school leadership teams) play another key role as *leaders from the middle*—as interpreters, translators, and mediators between districts and classrooms. While this report does not directly address the role of school leaders, it is understood that they are a fundamental part of school district capacity.

model encourages initiative at all levels, and requires active capacity building (developing the culture and competencies to be effective) within and across levels.

There is a dilemma in establishing the right drivers in action. On the one hand, the approach eschews punitive imposition, but on the other hand laissez-faire drift is not valued. The answer is to increase purposeful interaction that leads to greater specificity and sharing of what is being learned, and to intervene selectively and supportively when progress is not occurring. Put another way, *LftM* is not as loose as it appears. It includes definable and measurable goals, specificity of action, transparency of practice and results, and other processes that forge solutions and ongoing development. In this 'stocktaking report' we will highlight the strengths, weaknesses and progress as of the summer of 2017 in implementing the new LCFF reform.

B. California's Adoption of the Right Drivers

In a presentation to the Stuart Foundation Board in June 2017, Mike Kirst, President of the State Board of Education, observed that three powerful forces converged in 2013 to enable the education reform currently underway: a healthy increase in state revenue, a broad-based political coalition (against the grain of the Federal Government and several other states, California partnered with rather than declared war on teacher unions), and the presence of big ideas to shape the content of the reform (new standards in English and math, science, and more recently, history and civics).

The state also deliberately shifted its strategy away from the wrong drivers and embraced the right drivers. The accountability system was revamped away from 'shame and blame' toward a transparent and supportive new state 'blueprint',⁶ followed by a report on accountability and continuous improvement commissioned by the State Superintendent.⁷ Among other things, the Advisory Task Force that prepared the report noted: "The emerging California Way builds on a collaborative approach to positive education change" (p. 3). Three pillars formed the foundation of the report: performance, equity and improvement. Thus, overall attainment was one measure, but also *year over year progress* of subgroups in relation to the eight state priorities and two county offices' priorities (see Table 2) was highlighted as a measure of increased equity. The emphasis on both equity and excellence is at the heart of the system transformation in California. Among the state level indicators were new measures integrating status of and improvement in English and math based on the Smarter Balanced Assessment System that the state adopted and implemented.

At the Stuart meeting, Kirst concluded that: "We got all the policies right, but not yet the depth of implementation." We agree. The policies are aligned, and thus provide a solid framework for potential success. Beginning in 2013-2014, the state moved away from a highly centralized funding scheme, based mostly on categorical funding,⁸ to a new participatory framework whereby school districts are expected and supported to engage in consultation with their local communities, unions and staff to determine their core priorities in relation to the ten priorities (Table 2) and allocate

⁶ State Superintendent of Public Instruction (2015) *A Blueprint for Great Schools. Version 2.0*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

⁷ Superintendent's Advisory Task Force on Accountability and Continuous Improvement (2016) *Preparing All Students for College, Career, Life, and Leadership in the 21st Century*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

⁸ It is important to note that LCFF moved California away from categorical funding at the state level, but not at the federal level.

Table 2: State and Local Indicators by LCFF Priority Area

LCFF Priority Areas	State Indicator ⁹	Local Indicator ¹⁰
Priority 1: Basic Conditions at School (Appropriately-Assigned Teachers, Access to Curriculum-Aligned Instructional Materials, and Safe, Clean, and Functional School Facilities)		Annual report on progress and results
Priority 2: Implementation of State Academic Standards		Annual report on progress and results
Priority 3: Parent Engagement		Annual report on progress and results
Priority 4: Academic Achievement	CAASPP results for English Language Arts and Mathematics (grades 3-8) CAASPP 11 th grade results part of College Career Indicator (grade 11 Report) English Learner Progress	
Priority 5: Student Engagement	Chronic Absenteeism Graduation Rate	
Priority 6: School Climate	Suspension Rate	Annual report on progress and results
Priority 7: Access to Broad Course of Study		Currently under development by the SBE
Priority 8: Outcomes in Broad Course of Study	College/Career Indicator	
Priority 9: Coordination of Services for Expelled Students (COE only)		Annual report on progress and results
Priority 10: Coordination of Services for Foster Youth (COE only)		Annual report on progress and results

⁹ For more information on the California Accountability Model and School Dashboard, please see:
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/>

¹⁰ For more information on LCFF Local Indicators, please see:
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/documents/localinddetailreport.pdf>

funding accordingly. The LCFF brought equity to the forefront by allocating additional resources to districts with higher proportions of students in poverty, English Learners (EL), and foster youth. The process required each district to develop a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) in consultation with parents, the community, staff and other key stakeholders, and to submit it annually to their local county office for approval.

In the meantime, the state adopted new standards and revamped its accountability system. Unlike many states across the nation, California was successful in adopting new state standards aligned with the Common Core, with broad political support from all major stakeholders. On the accountability front, the state suspended the previous single Academic Performance Index (API), and replaced it with a new system based on the eight state and two county priorities, which are measured by state and local level indicators. The indicators for which there are state level data are now reported in a recently launched Dashboard, which made its debut in 2017. The Dashboard features indicators of performance for each of the state level indicators. The SBD intends to also include local level indicators in the Dashboard.

The California Department of Education shifted to a ‘policy framing’ stance, playing a largely hands-off role relative to day-to-day implementation of LCFF. The 58 county offices, most of which have multiple districts (often 30 or more) within their geographic regions, were to approve LCAP plans annually. And a new entity called the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) was created by legislation. The purpose of CCEE, stated in the official terms of reference in the legislative act that created it, is “to advise and assist school districts, county superintendents of schools, and charter schools in achieving the goals set forth in a local control and accountability plan” (Education Code 52074). In effect, CCEE was deliberately set up with a general mandate with a small staff and a current annual budget of some 13.4 million. The idea was that the CCEE Board and CEO would define its work in consultation with the sector. By the time we completed this report, CCEE had been in operation for only 18 months, which is to say that it is still in the process of establishing its role in relation to counties and districts.

Taken together, these are bold decisions designed to transform the culture of a very large complex system with some 6.2 million students across more than 1000 school districts in a multi-layered organization. Our task in this report is to consider how the reform is faring at the level of three core intermediary agencies—the CDE, CCEE, and county offices—four years after the launch of LCFF. We offer recommendations moving forward, bearing in mind that Governor Jerry Brown and State Superintendent Tom Torlakson are about to enter the last year of their respective administrations (being prohibited by law from seeking third terms).

C. Methodology

We were not set up to do a major research study, hence we have called this a ‘stock take’. Our team is involved in several multi-district initiatives and has established good working relationships with all major bodies: ACSA, CCEE, CDE, CSBA, CCSESA, CTA, CFT and the State Board of Education (see Glossary of Acronyms at the end of the report). Thus, we get to know a great deal on the ground. To consolidate our knowledge for this report, we gathered and reviewed official documents, and conducted over 60 interviews with leaders from districts, counties, the state department and other official bodies. The ideas presented here draw on the interviews and focus groups with leaders in the State Board of Education (SBE), the California Department of Education (CDE), the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA), the California Collaborative for

Educational Excellence (CCEE), 10 county offices, and superintendents from a diverse selection of 10 (large, medium and small) school districts, as well as a handful of academics and practitioners in universities, think-tanks, professional associations, and capacity building institutions involved in California's education sector.

In this report, we give prominent attention to how LCFF and the associated roles of CDE, CCEE and county offices are playing out in the everyday experiences of leaders from the middle, rather than the intentions set out on paper (in policy documents and other written sources). Our stock take, in other words, is about how leaders at different levels are experiencing the implementation of the reform on the ground. The findings and ideas presented here are based on the identification of common themes across the multiple conversations we held with our interviewees. Any quotes we use in this report are illustrative of recurrent themes from interviews with several respondents. For fact checking and face validity purposes, an initial draft was shared with key leaders of the three participating intermediary agencies and a subset of district superintendents and allies. Their feedback with respect to factual matters and points of clarification were incorporated in this final version.

D. Findings

We will start with a summary of our main findings including both the pluses and minuses of the current state of LCFF implementation. We will then proceed to unpack the findings.

1. Policies are aligned and people in the system, all the way from the State Board to school districts, recognize and appreciate that this is the case.
2. Despite many problems (some of which we discuss below), virtually *all* those we interviewed endorsed the new system and urged decision makers to stay the course with the new LCFF/LCAP system.
3. LCFF/LCAP was based on the assumption that most districts would have the capacity to proceed with implementation, given local autonomy and resources. The model seriously underestimated how much capacity would be needed to make the reform successful at the local level. Many districts are struggling with the question of *how* to effectively implement LCFF/LCAP. In some cases LCAP can become an end in itself: "We develop the plan to check the box to get the money." The latter does not necessarily represent deliberate distortion as much as it reflects the lack of know-how about capacity building strategies.
4. The LCAP approval process became a bureaucratic diversion. The problems are being addressed each year through modifications to the LCAP template and other requirements. But the overtly bureaucratic requirements, and even the changes that seek to address them, remain a distraction. In the absence of new capacities, people (at both the district and county levels) often fall back on familiar bureaucratic habits. The combination of bureaucratic specifications, and existing compliance habits (on both the county and district sides) has resulted in a cumbersome LCAP planning process and outcome often leading to unwieldy plans. We found that this problem was being actively addressed.

Also, LCAP submission and approval requirements for charter schools are different from those for districts. While districts have to submit their LCAP to counties for approval, the approval of LCAP for charter schools lies solely in the charter school governing board. Charter schools submit their LCAP to their 'authorizer' (most often a school district) only for information purposes.

5. The new role of county offices has been problematic. CCSESA has led efforts to build the capacity of counties to shift their primary role vis-à-vis districts from one of compliance and provision of services to one of support for continuous improvement. However, the capacity of counties remains uneven. Building the capacity of counties and changing the culture of compliance from the old system to the new system is crucial.
6. The roles of CDE, CCEE, and their relationship to county offices and districts are ambiguous and unknown to many of those we interviewed.
7. The eight state and two county priorities and the new Dashboard with its state level indicators are on balance useful, and a great improvement over the previous API indicator. In our view, 10 priorities and their associated indicators are too many.
8. Early results are positive: an increase in graduation rates and reduction of absenteeism and suspensions, a continued increase in eligibility for admissions at California State University (CSU), with larger gains among Latino and African American students, and slight gains in the new state assessment are significant developments. It is too early to tell how much impact there has been on academic performance because the SBAC assessment system is new, different, and its administration started only in the spring of 2015. Furthermore, it is hard to tell at this point how much of the improved graduation rates, reduced absenteeism, and increased eligibility for admission at CSU can be attributed to LCFF specifically, since all these figures have been increasing somewhat steadily since before the launch of LCFF. That the trend continues to be one of improved performance, however, is an encouraging sign.
9. All those we interviewed were aware of the need to show results sooner than later. They are conscious that change takes time yet feel a sense of urgency about being successful; and they are anxious about the 2018 election and the change of governor and state superintendent that will follow.
10. It takes capacity to build capacity. Recently there has been a shift on the part of the main agencies in realizing that much more direct attention must be paid to capacity building. Thus, in the next phase the quality of capacity building will be a major issue. We include here strategies whereby districts learn from other districts and counties learn from each other.

In sum, even though its implementation has been somewhat bumpy and cumbersome, LCFF is viewed positively across California's education system—from central offices to school districts. There is a widely shared perception that the new funding strategy is much better than the older one and that the system is moving in the right direction.¹¹ Overall, districts see in LCFF an opportunity to engage their communities in defining the vision and priorities for the district and to attach dollars to these locally determined priorities. District superintendents, especially in districts with high proportions of English Learners, students living in poverty, and foster youth, appreciate the additional resources that have been made available to their districts through LCFF.

¹¹ To be sure, there are several aspects of LCFF and LCAP that need recalibrating and revision, such as the need to shift the nature of the relationship between many counties and districts from a compliance orientation to a capacity building and support orientation; considering the inclusion of students with special needs in the formula for targeted funding; addressing the problem of the many districts that end up being funded significantly below the funding average for daily attendance (ADA) relative to comparable districts due to their relatively small proportion of students living in poverty, English Learners, and foster youth. These more specific issues, however, fall beyond the scope of this document.

As we said, there are early signs that student outcomes continue to improve since California embarked on its new improvement journey. Suspension rates dropped by 33% between 2011 and 2015. California high schools have maintained a seven-year trajectory of increased graduation rates, from 74.7% in 2010 to a record high of 83.2% in 2016, with larger gains among English Learners (from 56% to 72.1%), African American students (from 60.5% to 72.1%) and Latino students (from 68.1% to 80%). Furthermore, the percentages of students meeting or exceeding the new, more challenging standards adopted by the state increased for all grades tested in English language arts and mathematics between 2015 and 2016, in the second year of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP).¹² As another sign of continued improvement in college readiness, eligibility for admission at CSU has increased from 32.7% in 2007 to an all-time high of 40.8% in 2015, with African American and Latino students making larger gains than their White counterparts. In that period, eligibility for admission to CSU went up from 24% to 30% for African American Students (6% increase), from 22.5% to 31.9% for Latino students (a 9.4% increase), and from 37.1% to 39.8% for White students (2.7% increase).¹³

These early signs of improvement must be acknowledged and celebrated. But California's reform journey is far from being a definite success. Using CAASPP as a measure of college and career readiness, three in every five grade 11 students in California are ready or conditionally ready for college work in English language arts, and one in three are ready for college work in mathematics. This means that many students—two in every five in the case of English language arts and two in every three in the case of math—are still not prepared for college work. And important achievement gaps remain. For example, only 37% Latino and 31% African American students exceed the California standards in English Language Arts, compared to 64% of their White counterparts.

A message we heard repeatedly from district superintendents, leaders of CDE, CCEE, and county offices, as well as from interviewees in universities, think-tanks, professional development organizations, and the teachers' association, was that more time is needed before LCFF starts to translate into stronger student outcomes. It is true that any substantive policy change such as LCFF requires time to take roots in the everyday activities of districts, schools, and classrooms, but time is not all that is required. Translating the good intentions and powerful vision of LCFF into clear, measurable, and sustainable impact requires deliberate, relentless, and coordinated efforts of all actors in the system, in particular among CDE, CCEE, and county offices. This involves developing and continuously testing and refining a working theory of action that causally links strategy to substantially improved teaching and learning; taking a serious look at and enhancing the status of capacity for improvement across the sector; clarifying the roles and coordinating and sharpening the activities of CDE, CCEE and county offices so that they support each other and districts in pursuing a shared improvement agenda; and—in the current political times of federal turmoil and with some 16 months left in Governor Jerry Brown's administration—developing a strategy to secure the sustainability of LCFF over the long run.

We develop these key ideas throughout the rest of the report. We start by examining LCFF's underlying theory of action and proposing key suggestions to enhance it. We then offer succinct definitions of the key but relatively vague concepts of capacity building and continuous

¹² By the time we were completing this report, the 2017 CAASPP results were in the hands of school districts, although they had not yet been publicly released. For this reason, they are not included here.

¹³ California Department of Education. Report Shows Eligibility for CSU at an All-Time High, with Latino and African American Students Making Largest Gains. Rel #17-58, August 25, 2017.

improvement. Finally, we present six recommendations on the roles CDE, CCEE and county offices could play and the coordination that could be established among the three, to ensure that the California Way translates into undisputable and sustainable success.

Theory of Action

Simply stated, a theory of action is a statement or a series of interconnected statements that link actions with intended results. A good theory of action has three main attributes: 1) it is a *statement of causal relationship*—it articulates how specific capacities and actions will *cause* intended results; 2) it is *empirically falsifiable*—it can be tested against evidence from implementation and either confirmed or rejected; 3) it is *open ended*—it can and should be constantly modified and refined based on learning and feedback from implementation.

As can be distilled from existing documents and descriptions of multiple leaders of California’s education system, the core theory of action underlying LCFF can be articulated along the following lines:

If teachers, school leaders and district administrators are trusted and given the freedom and resources to make decisions to solve the problems which they are best positioned to solve,

and **if** ongoing transparent data on progress in the core state priorities is reported

and **if** corrective action is taken in cases of consistent underperformance (with assistance being offered to struggling districts by counties and/or by CCEE)

Then student outcomes will improve.

This theory of action omits capacity building, i.e., whether or not the districts have the capacity to improve teaching and learning in all their schools. The LCFF/LCAP theory of action, as we said earlier, represents a significant departure from the high stakes accountability era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and, in the case of California, the API-based system under the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA). These high-stakes accountability policies placed their hopes on improving student achievement by establishing rewards and sanctions for schools and districts based on their success or failure to show continuous improvement in student achievement and reduced achievement gaps. The notion of subsidiarity underpinning LCFF can be very appealing as well when contrasted with the previous heavily centralized organization of California’s education system.

Be that as it may, it will not be sufficient to ‘mandate flexibility’. In our work we call this the ‘freedom from’ solution: necessary but not sufficient. People also need help in the ‘freedom to’ domain—what do they need to learn to be effective in the new circumstances.¹⁴ What this means is that LCFF’s theory of action needs to be revised and enhanced in at least two fundamental ways. First, a core assumption underlying this theory of action—namely that local actors already know what to do once granted local control to enhance and deepen student learning—has to be re-thought. Second, an explicit connection between the key actions undertaken under LCFF and improved teaching and learning in classrooms has to be articulated. We discuss these two core ideas next. The first idea:

¹⁴ Fullan, M. (2015) *Freedom to Change: Four Strategies to Put Your Inner Drive into Overdrive*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Assume that people are not changing their leading and teaching practice because **they don't know how**, not because they're not allowed to.*

The claim that people don't know how to change their practice is not a judgment on their individual intelligence, potential capacity or commitment. It is rather an observation about whether they have had the opportunity in the past to develop their collective capacity to change instruction in a way that will meet the needs of diverse learners. The change also relates to the pervasive role of organizational culture, and in particular what it is that people are used to doing. For a number of reasons, districts have not traditionally been rewarded for taking risks or challenging the status quo in instruction. In the previous system, poor performing districts were identified with the euphemism of 'program improvement district' in which the struggling schools and districts were given a list of tasks and actions to take—a strategy that falls well short of cultivating the mindsets and culture that would allow teachers, school and district leaders to identify and solve new problems.

The massive failure of high-stakes accountability to produce better and more equitable student outcomes is explained in part by its almost exclusive reliance on external motivation and its neglect—and even undermining—of the conditions that trigger internal motivation (purpose, autonomy, mastery, connectedness).¹⁵ Reducing constraints does not in itself sharpen purpose, increase mastery or develop connectedness. The following reflection from a member in a California research center involved in designing LCFF and CCEE reveals that the assumption that most people already know what to do to get better results doesn't seem to hold in the case of California.

"When [LCFF] got started, we thought that giving local districts flexibility and time would be enough to get them to commit to continuous improvement, that they would start moving forward on their own. And we recognized that there would be some districts where that wouldn't work, but the widespread assumption [...] was that relatively few districts would need support and that the support infrastructure we had would be sufficient. What we're seeing is the reverse: almost everybody needs support and only a few know how to put the LCFF to good use. You cannot simply expect districts to know how to do the work and to do it. CCEE was designed saying, well, we'll have to support a handful of troubling cases. But the scale is much more massive than we originally thought [...] I remember talking at a leadership institute for superintendents about the complete flexibility, no accountability and new resources that they would have, and the response was more about excuses and hesitation. It started to become clearer that without some guidance, some significant leadership and support they wouldn't do it. They don't know how [...] Neither pressure [a la NCLB] nor absence of pressure [first iteration of LCFF] work. What works is support."

LCFF has a much stronger chance to realize its desired impact if it uses as its starting assumption that if district leadership and teaching practice are not changing as expected, it is because people don't know how to do it. The Ontario reform is a case in point. Soon after the creation of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (the core capacity building unit created to advance the Ontario reform agenda, now merged into and known as the Student Achievement Division), its leaders decided to approach

¹⁵ See Pink, D. (2011) *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York: Riverhead Books; Deci, E.L. (1996) *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation*. New York: Penguin Books; and Ryan, R.M, & Deci, E.L. (2000) "Self Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being." *American Psychologist*, 55(1): 68-78.

struggling districts and schools assuming that they were not improving student outcomes because they didn't know how to, not because they didn't want to or were not allowed to. As it turns out, they were right over 90 percent of the time. The more that people were helped to build capacity, the more motivated and efficacious they became. This more realistic assumption allowed system leaders to design their capacity building strategy and to tailor their support based on a more solid understanding of the existing capacity of their schools and districts and thus with a better sense of what types of support were more likely to help them improve student outcomes. Using this direct, supportive approach, Ontario reduced its number of low performing schools from over 800 to fewer than 100. We'll discuss capacity building and continuous improvement in more detail in the next section. For now, we turn our attention to the second core idea to enhance LCFF's theory of action.

Establish a direct causal line between key strategies and improved teaching and learning.

A key feature of successful transformation in schools, districts, and systems is whether or not the focus is on improving instruction whereby teachers, individually and collectively develop more effective 'teaching and learning'. The production of a plan of course does not by itself improve capacity. In fact, we find that plans often contain the right words, but do not have the specific strategies and actions that are required to develop more effective and engaging instruction. We might call this 'superficial implementation of the right drivers'. Therefore, more explicit attention is required to specify how district LCAPs will address improvements in teaching and learning and its relationship to student outcomes.

The importance—and the challenge—of directly linking the actions of CDE, the CCEE and county offices to improved teaching and learning is articulated clearly and strongly in the following words of members of the State Board of Education, an education thought leader in California, and a county superintendent:

"We have done a good job on policy, but we lack depth in the capacity of our schools to pull off and implement our policies. [...] We've changed everything in policy and mostly passed all of the necessary accountability policies, but we haven't staged enough continuous improvement to get these policies where they want to be. And if you're not improving classroom instruction and what pupils are doing, then you're not doing much. My overall philosophy is that policy thinking has to focus on instruction rather than out-of-school conditions. I don't think there are a lot of conflicting policies that are out of line or incoherent, but there is a lack of depth." (SBE Member)

"Not many really understand how much effort is involved in making these efforts penetrate at the classroom level. There's a belief that we put together this new accountability system and classrooms will improve magically. It doesn't work that way. A lot of effort is needed to create the culture to get to the classrooms. [...] In the LCAP training for county superintendents the priority has been to help people understand all of the eight [ten including county level] priorities, how they fit together, and what are the expectations of all eight priorities. [...] I think that's been a mistake. As I envision it, if you start at the classroom and make it central, then obviously you will start with supporting teachers to fully understand and use and assess with the standards. When you've done that well and teachers are comfortable and have networks, then you move out of the classrooms and get other support systems. The idea of reducing suspensions and reductions is not the work of the teacher per se, but of the

administration. We dropped all that on to everybody at the same time [...] rather than starting on the heart of the matter: the classroom.” (County Superintendent)

“A key piece that has been missing in the agenda for me [...]: There’s very little around fundamentally changing teaching and learning. [...] We don’t have in this whole system a way of starting to think in an organized way about research and development functions, developing laboratories of new forces for teaching and learning. [...] Using what we’ve learned from working with schools and districts and what we know about what leads to school turnaround and sustainability of initiatives, we can create a through-line to improve student outcomes. We need to do a better job at taking what we know is right and reflect that in shorter, tighter phases. I’m really talking about our view of what teaching is and how you use media, communications, technology. [...] Somebody’s got to be creating adaptable pedagogy that teachers and kids can get directly. [...] I’d like to see teaching and learning agenda showing up. It is not being seen as urgent.” (Education Thought Leader)

A lot of energy and resources have been invested in ensuring that schools and districts gain familiarity with and learn how to prepare their LCAPs, the core instrument that allows schools and districts to access the funding granted by LCFF. This is important work but its impact will be very limited if all the energy is spent on it. In bureaucratic terms, as we said earlier, it is easy for plans to become ends in themselves: i.e., I need a plan because I need a plan, or I need a plan in order to get my budget. It is hard to see how exactly preparing an LCAP will translate into improved student outcomes. A district might get good at preparing great LCAPs while leaving the core culture of teaching and learning in schools untouched. And, as one district superintendent put it, “districts that don’t plan well, won’t plan well with LCAP either. Their LCAP will be just a compliance plan.”

Across the board, we found in the narratives of the leaders we talked to a very weak link between the key actions undertaken by CDE, CCEE, and county offices on one hand, and improved teaching and learning in classrooms on the other. The exceptions were a few leaders from county offices who were able to articulate with clarity and precision how their work resulted in improved teaching practice. In our terminology above, current LCAP plans often lack a theory of specific actions expected to obtain new results. Without a clear and intentional articulation of the causal pathways between LCFF and enhanced teaching practice, LCFF is likely to produce a lot of activity but little in terms of results. A first order of business is then to articulate a clear theory of action that connects the core activities of CDE, CCEE and county offices with substantially improved teaching practice. These three intermediary agencies should not only *stand* for improved teaching practice but should also help *cause* it through deliberate, focused, and strategic action. The standards collaboration committees developed by CDE, SBE, and CCSESA to roll out the new state standards was mentioned by many of the people we interviewed as an example of effective and impactful collaboration between intermediate agencies. A similar structure and process could be established among CDE, SBE, CCEE, and CCSESA to zero in on significantly enhancing teaching practice in schools.

The California Department of Education is setting itself to establish ongoing cycles of continuous improvement and becoming a learning organization.¹⁶ The core ideas in these efforts will result in improved performance to the extent that they are used to continuously test and refine a theory of action that: a) takes as its starting assumption that the key reason learning, teaching and leadership are not changing in any significant way is that people don't know how to do it, and b) directly links the core strategies of California's intermediary agencies to improved teaching and learning. A major role for CDE, CCEE and counties is to develop and provide the supports more likely to produce significant improvements in teaching and learning, and doing so in an iterative way, shaping and reshaping good ideas while building capacity and ownership, and getting better and better as organizations as a result. Having said that, CDE is taking a relatively hands-off stance when it comes to local implementation, the capacity building and coordinating roles of counties and CCEE become critical. So far we have not observed widespread capacity building in practice although most people we interviewed agree that it is desirable. Finally, we should note that there are a number of multi-district collaboratives in the state that focus on school improvement. It is beyond our scope to examine these initiatives.

Capacity Building and Continuous Improvement

California has embraced the ideas of capacity building and continuous improvement as an alternative to compliance-based solutions. Again, this is a step in the right direction as compliance strategies do not produce their intended results. A key problem is that, unlike high-stakes external accountability, capacity building and continuous improvement are harder to define specifically. A compliance-based strategy can be stated simply and clearly: name targets, measure outcomes and establish consequences—rewards to those who succeed, punishments of various sorts to those who don't. The definition of capacity building and continuous improvement is vague. And this can lead, as in the case of California, to the current untenable situation where critics make specific charges (for example, student outcomes and equity are not improving quickly enough), while defenders respond with generalities such as *capacity building takes time*. When it comes to educational change, it is never effective to respond to specific criticism with general explanations. Instead, specific criticism must be met with specific responses. Thus, we need district and school leaders who can develop and articulate action plans that have clarity and specificity. In order to do this, capacity building and continuous improvement have to be defined in clear terms. Here is our working definition of both.

¹⁶ See for example:

- Superintendent's Accountability and Continuous Improvement Task Force, California Department of Education (2016), Preparing All Students for College, Career, Life, and Leadership in the 21st Century, Retrieved from: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ar/account-report-2016.asp>
- Torlakson, T., & Price, G. (2016) Towards a Learning State: California's Journey Toward Continuous Improvement. Retrieved from: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/on_california/2016/11/towards_a_learning_state_californias_journey_toward_continuous_improvement.html
- Price, G., Ollison, J., & Mullen, B. (2017). Towards a Learning State – Part II: Innovating to Create and Scale Professional Learning Systems Supporting Continuous Improvement. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

Capacity building is about developing individual and collective skills, competencies and dispositions in four interrelated areas:

1. *Relationship building* with individuals and groups from all backgrounds.
2. *Pedagogical skills* relative to nurturing and deepening the learning of diverse individuals and groups.
3. *Assessment* with respect to defining, measuring, and using evidence for diagnostic, monitoring and action taking purposes.
4. *Change leadership* in relation to motivating diverse people, addressing conflict, problem-solving, while attending to developing individuals and groups daily and for the future (developing leaders on a continuous basis).

Continuous improvement refers to the actions and evidence that demonstrate that you are getting better and better in relation to the above four elements, and that you are seeking and developing breakthrough innovations with respect to deep problems such as achieving excellence and de facto equity. Breakthrough innovations include specific and high yield solutions to fundamental problems such as ‘how to reverse the effects of concentrated, intergenerational poverty’. Insights arising from neuroscience, using the group to change the group, the power of digital to deepen and accelerate student learning, students as change agents who engage the world to change the world, discovering ‘hidden figures’ (talents previously missed or that went uncultivated), are among recent existing breakthrough innovations. We also believe that equity is best served by developing engaging pedagogy (i.e., excellence in learning) along with new solutions related to health, housing and safety.¹⁷

CDE, CCEE and county offices will have a much stronger impact if they deliberately cultivate capacity and continuous improvement as defined here, while engaging in the details, accounting in as specific terms as possible what are the positive results and what is left to be done, and continuously testing and refining their theories of action. Our recommendations in the next section look at CDE, CCEE, and county offices through the lens of capacity building and continuous improvement. But before the recommendations, let us discuss some of the core challenges and possibilities for capacity building and continuous improvement in California.

The State Board of Education has established a bold new direction for the state’s education sector, which includes embracing the right drivers, operating through cycles of continuous improvement, and redefining its accountability strategy. Some of the main challenges CDE faces as the operational arm of the State Board to inculcate this new vision in its regular operations include its very small size (staff at the CDE has been reduced to almost its minimum possible size), and the fact that between 70% and 80% of its staff is hired with federal funds with the mandate to ensuring compliance relative to federal programs. In this context, we do agree that CDE’s key role is to frame and monitor continuous improvement.

The department has set the intention to establish and has already initiated an internal process of collaboration and continuous improvement. At the time of our last visit to Sacramento in late February, a few deputy superintendents remained skeptical and cautious about the feasibility and

¹⁷ Fullan, M., & Gallagher, M.J. (2017) Transforming Systems, Deep Learning, and the Equity Hypothesis. Paper prepared for the Learning Policy Institute, Stanford University.

desirability of CDE's internal reorganization. But overall, we perceived a widely shared sense of optimism and excitement among leaders and staff of CDE for its internal re-organization as a more collaborative and improvement-oriented organization. This process should continue while intentionally looking at and redefining the roles of federally funded staff positions from a compliance mindset to a capacity building and support mindset. The direction set by the new federal administration, which further decentralizes decision-making and offers more latitude to states, may be helpful to reorient the use of federally supported staff and resources in California. Coming back to an idea we articulated earlier, there's an opportunity to *exploit upwards*, or leverage the current federal environment to advance and deepen California's agenda. Indeed, this is what CDE and the SBE expect to accomplish through the new ESSA plan for California,¹⁸ which seeks to create a single, coherent system that integrates state and federal accountability structures. Key elements of this new plan include the integration of the school plans required under ESSA with the LCAP, the alignment of state and federal accountability metrics, and the development of a multi-levelled system of support for schools and other Local Education Agencies (LEAs).

That being said, California's ESSA plan is just a first step, and perhaps the easy one. A compliance mindset continues to be alive and well in California's education sector, and shifting mindsets towards a support and capacity building orientation will require significant effort. Many of the district superintendents we talked to pointed out that they continue to experience heavily compliance-oriented requests from CDE personnel—for example, through Federal Program Monitoring audits—which give disproportionate attention to bureaucratic compliance and have little to do with and distract districts from their efforts to improve student learning. The following testimony from a district superintendent illustrates the bureaucratic compliance requests their districts continue to deal with to this day:

"We had our Federal Program Monitoring visit from the State. Oh lord, these people act like we have all the time to check every administrative regulation, every board policy, to double check every little detail [...] They had our TOSAS [Teachers on Special Assignment] write several pages every day explaining what they do because they want over 5% of their overall salaries working our summer institute. It's just a reminder that local control has come into place through LCFF but the state, through things like the federal program monitoring is just as compliance oriented as before or more. [...] For two weeks, seven people from FPM descended on the district, looking at little nitpicky things that had nothing to do with how well kids learn or our student learning outcomes. [...] It's a huge issue, because the State Department is almost fully funded out of categorical, so they have not moved from a compliance driven bureaucracy. This is so frustrating."

In our own attempt to re-position accountability we have found that the *attitude* to following policy regulations is often more important than the regulations per se. It is one thing to have a bureaucratic mindset (you must follow the rules to the T; or even a gotcha approach) compared to a problem-solving mindset (what are you trying to accomplish and how can I help). The exact same policy can be experienced very differently depending on the mindset in the system. California is moving toward a joint problem-solving culture but is still in transition.

¹⁸ California Department of Education (2017) Every Student Succeeds Act. California's Draft Plan. May, 2017.

Thus, despite their original intent, LCAPs are amongst the most recent and prevalent compliance requirements for many districts. On the one hand, the specific state requirements, seeking to accommodate the demands from multiple stakeholders, have turned LCAPs into unnecessarily heavy and cumbersome documents. On the other hand, a compliance mindset is still prevalent in many county offices. This should come as no surprise, as this is what state categorical programs required from counties in the past. With the arrival of LCFF, many county offices placed the responsibility for the approval of LCAP on the staff who previously handled state categorical funding, which exacerbated the compliance tone that some district leaders report. Combined together, the proliferation of specific requirements from the state, and the compliance orientation in some counties have turned LCAP into a heavily bureaucratic and time-consuming requirement for districts and charter schools alike. The following quote from a former district superintendent illustrates this point:

“With our LCAP, 25 pages rapidly became a document with over 300 pages. What was a clear and succinct plan eventually became redundant, complicated, and unnecessarily detailed.”

In addition to their existing culture of compliance, county offices face pressure from the State Board, CDE, and CCSESA to be consistent in the LCAP approval process in order to avoid lawsuits from advocacy groups and to respond to complaints from school district leaders about inconsistent treatment. This, in turn, makes staff in counties tighten compliance requirements relative to LCAPs. With its origins both in the internal cultures of counties and the CDE, as well as in external pressures on them, compliance gets in the way of fully adopting an assistance and support role.

Capacity building and continuous improvement are prominent concepts in some of the key documents produced and disseminated by CDE and the State Board but are yet to become visible in the everyday activities of CDE and the other intermediary agencies. Districts and counties will greatly benefit from intentional efforts from CDE and CCEE to model and show what capacity building and continuous improvement look and feel like. In our view, deliberately building a culture of support, capacity building, and continuous improvement across its core activities and programs should be a priority for CDE in the upcoming months.

In addition to its work of internal restructuring as a learning organization, the CDE will have another crucial role to play, which includes establishing and ensuring the widespread ownership of a clear directional vision for California's education sector, maintaining the focus of the system on its new vision, convening key stakeholders, creating the conditions of effective accountability, and coordinating and supporting the overall capacity building strategy of the state. As an intermediary between counties and districts on the one hand and the governor and legislators on the other, CDE also can play an important role cultivating alliances and coherence with the governor's office, legislative staff, and opinion leaders across the state.

Having defined and discussed capacity building and continuous improvement, what might be the best approach to develop and enhance the capacity of over 1000 school districts and charter school organizations to substantially improve the quality and equity of student outcomes across California? We turn to this very question in the six recommendations below.

E. Recommendations

The single fundamental change principle from our system change work is this: *people learn best and most from others doing similar work and getting success*. Therefore, California should turn its attention to enabling schools, districts, and charter organizations to learn from each other. The enabling bodies—CDE, CCEE, and county offices—should base their work on helping to cause focused learning of the type we are talking about. We note that both CCEE and CCSEA are moving in the direction of greater involvement in capacity building. Be that as it may, these developments have not yet happened, and the constraints we identified earlier still exist.

Our recommendations are based on the above analysis, and are designed to move the system forward in a direction that seems to have widespread support, but has not yet been realized. These six recommendations should be treated as an interrelated set.

Recommendation One: Establish a Clear Directional Vision Linked to Capacity Building

California has a strong, broadly aligned vision. Let's call this the steering wheel. They have a developing valuable set of performance indicators that they call the Dashboard. California should continue to work on refining these two basic elements. In between the steering wheel and the Dashboard is the black box of capacity building. Attention should shift to enabling the development and spread of practices that focus on the improvement of teaching and learning, and community development that address excellence and equity simultaneously.

One of the most important things the State Board and CDE can do is to deepen the sense of general agreement with the new direction California's education sector is taking, along with fostering district examples of progress. While the directional vision is clearly present in documents and the discourse of leaders at SBE, CDE, CCEE and CCSESA, it is yet to be clearly present in, let alone owned by districts and schools. We identified, especially among current and former district leaders, a sense of lack of direction at the state level as to what the California Way means operationally. While it seems quite clear to those we interviewed what the state is moving away from (that is, punitive accountability), what it is moving towards was harder to see. The following quotes illustrate this perceived lack of direction:

"I don't think I can define the California Way. Rather than an actual direction, it's a reaction: 'We didn't like NCLB and we'll move as far away from it as we can'. The focus is on what we don't want. I agree with the notion of local control, but I also believe in the state's role in setting direction and helping districts move in that direction."

"No one has said we want to go back to compliance, but not having a real vision for what it is that we want is not going to get it done. [...] It's ok to say what you don't want, but what do you want? [...] Folks at CDE continue to maintain the good intentions of local control, taking the focus off of compliance, but I don't think it's treading water. [...] If you ask people [...] I don't think they're feeling a lot of direction from the state. [...] Saying no to compliance is ok, but it might be better to know where you're going and being compliant than not knowing where you're going and being anything. We need a clear statement of where California is going, who'll do what to get there and how we know it's working."

In our view, the ‘freedom from’ problem—don’t fence me in with compliance—has been addressed, but the ‘freedom to’ opportunity—what do I do now—has been neglected. People do need an inspiring vision as well as help in developing the know how of implementation.

Recommendation Two: Clarify and Update CCEE’s Role

In its brief 18 months of existence, CCEE has supported the development of networks and the delivery of workshops to build capacity around LCAP. CCEE is also conducting about a dozen pilots with voluntary school districts and a county office. The pilots have the double intention of providing technical assistance in the implementation of LCAP and figuring out what effective technical assistance can look like. Up to this point, CCEE has mainly supported a network learning approach in which it funded 28 ‘Early Adopter Professional Learning Networks’ in round one, and more recently in round two has funded 57 professional learning networks. Given our analysis earlier it is important that these networks focus on capacity building in terms of directly or indirectly improving teaching and learning practices linked to student progress and achievement.

From its inception, it was assumed that the role of CCEE would evolve based on experience. The need to clarify and update its role is even more important now that it’s becoming increasingly clear that the scenario that LCFF/LCAP anticipated (districts taking advantage of local autonomy) is very different than the reality (lack of capacity). As we discussed earlier, the assumption that most of the over 1000 school districts in the state already have the necessary capacity to adopt and capitalize on LCFF/LCAP to effectively improve student outcomes, and that only a few chronically underperforming districts need deliberate intervention and support (by the very small team of CCEE) needs to be revised. A few years into implementation of LCAP, it appears that an imbalance in the opposite direction is closer to the reality: only a few districts are ready to adopt and take advantage of LCFF and LCAP, while a vast number of districts weren’t prepared for it. In this new scenario, CCEE’s role has to go beyond intervening when requested by a district or in cases of chronic underperformance. Below we outline some of the specific ways in which CCEE could amplify its impact across the state.

- a) *Establishing internal cycles of continuous improvement as an organization, documenting progress and making the results and the learning from the work visible across the whole state.* Many of the district superintendents we talked to mentioned they had no idea or knew only very vaguely about CCEE. Among those aware of the work currently undertaken by CCEE, there is a shared sense that the agency is still figuring out its role in the larger system wide improvement effort in California’s education. For now, that’s a reasonable position to be at, given its very short existence, the massive scale of the capacity building puzzle in California, and the multiple possible reasonable shapes the organization could take. At the same time, in order to become a plausible, credible, and trusted leader in the process of continuous improvement, CCEE has to intentionally and quickly systematize its learning and make it highly visible across the system. In the words of a leader of a research center close to CCEE:

“If they’re to play the role they must play in this new system, they need to commit themselves to learning and not just doing. [...] Over time they can bring counties along—‘look we’re learning, getting better at this work, there are things we can support you to do.’ [...] CCEE needs to prove not only that they can be helpful in districts, but that they’re learning and getting better at this kind of work. I don’t see that happening yet.”

This perception may be based on lack of knowledge about what CCEE is actually doing and planning. Our recommendation remains, which is that CCEE's role should be clarified, updated, and made more visible in relation to the sector.

- b) *Deliberately supporting the development of capacity in counties when providing technical assistance to districts.* As will be further discussed below, building the capacity of counties to effectively support district improvement is a crucial aspect of the capacity building puzzle in California. Reportedly, some counties have already started to move in this direction. We believe that CCEE, counties, and the system as a whole will benefit and accelerate their improvement efforts if CCEE intentionally uses its pilots, networks and workshops to also enhance the capacity of counties to support the continuous improvement of districts.
- c) *Mapping out existing capacity for improvement in districts and counties.* Little is known about the status of capacity for improvement available in districts and counties across the state. Some of the people we talked to estimated that there may be a hundred or so districts with the capacity and the ability to explain how they have managed to improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps. Others believe there might be just a few dozen such districts. Some believe that only five or six out of the 58 county offices have embraced their new role as builders of capacity for district improvement (as opposed to service providers) and as support providers (as opposed to compliance-oriented agencies); whereas for others the number of such counties might be as high as 20 or 25. Identifying key agreed upon measures of capacity and mapping out the actual status of capacity for improvement across the state is an important step to gain a good sense of the talent and expertise that can be leveraged to develop the capacity for improvement of other districts and counties across the state. The mapping out of existing capacity for improvement among counties should not be done for evaluation purposes but for internal clarity about the current status of capacity across the state. The solution will likely require a strategy that differentiates the needs of districts by size and demographics (perhaps in six or so categories).
- d) *Facilitating strategically designed, lateral learning partnerships between districts and between counties with a focus on enhancing their capacity to improve teaching and learning.* Conceived as a small and nimble organization, CCEE is in a unique position to connect district and county needs to available resources (e.g., other districts or counties who are strong in particular areas), breaking down silos, and cultivating social capital across California's education system. This requires a growing and evolving understanding of existing capacity for improvement available in the system (see previous point), knowledge of the most pressing needs experienced by districts and counties, and the ability to serve as a broker to effectively connect the dots. CCEE should prioritize and work on establishing a direct line between its work with counties and districts and improved teaching and learning.
- e) *Developing or coordinating an evolving repository of effective strategies, artifacts, practices, and organizations to be made available to districts and counties.* Ideally, any district or county struggling toward or with an interest in improving its performance in any of the eight state education priorities, or on taking full advantage of key policy instruments such as LCAPs or the Dashboard, should know there's a go-to place to search for examples of other districts or counties doing it effectively. CCEE is currently coordinating the development of a library of LCAP resources. This is a positive development, especially if the main criterion to select these resources

is how relevant and useful they are to build capacity for continuous improvement in school districts and county offices (rather than merely creating an LCAP).

Recommendation Three: Redefine the Role and Build the Capacity of County Offices.

County offices have a crucial role to play, although one that is fundamentally different from the role most have historically played—from compliance, supervision and delivery of services to capacity building and continuous improvement. In fact, we worked out a set of guiding principles in 2016 with a group of six county offices that represented the full group. At that time, the group agreed that they should and wanted to shift their roles as follows:

1. Shift from compliance to mutual capacity building related to student learning and achievement
2. Foster systematic collaboration to improve student outcomes
3. Build a culture of co-learning that leads to sustainable change
4. Promote a climate of candor, evidence, and urgency for action

There are several activities along these lines beginning to happen including work between COE's and CCEE on "building capacity for differentiated assistance," and other collaboratives. The question, as we have said, is whether these activities result in actual increased capacity.

We recommend that the state make it a clear priority for counties to learn to become enabling organizations for local capacity building. Having a relatively manageable number of school districts (there are 58 county offices for approximately 1000 school districts), county offices are the best positioned to reach the hundreds of school districts that may require support to design and execute effective and coherent strategies to improve teaching and learning and enhance student outcomes. Currently, however, there seems to be wide variation among counties in terms of their willingness and capacity to effectively support district improvement as well as in terms of their orientation (compliance vs capacity building). Also, the current understanding among counties of what 'supporting' districts means might differ from what is currently needed. The conception of support to districts we are referring to is linked to the definitions of capacity building and continuous improvement we offered earlier in this report. Furthermore, even with county offices that have embraced their new role, the issue of *not knowing how*, which we raised earlier in regards to teachers and school leaders, is likely to apply in this case as well.

How to develop the capacity and nurture the right type of mindset among county offices to effectively support district improvement is one of the key puzzles California will have to solve in order to realize its promise of dramatically improved quality and equity of student outcomes. Here again, a stance that identifies and leverages the existing knowledge and expertise available in counties, while respectfully and transparently surfacing and addressing gaps in capacity, is required. The solution might involve such things as using existing networks of counties—organized into regions—to stimulate effective, focused and impactful collaboration; intentionally including counties in high-yielding capacity building events and projects led by CCEE, CDE, or other professional learning organizations; identifying core problems of practice to be collectively tackled by county offices, CCEE, and CDE, etc.

Reportedly, events such as the adoption of the new California Standards, the creation of CCEE, the arrival of LCAPs, and more recently the launch of the California Dashboard have prompted CCSESA

and some of the counties it represents to gain awareness of the need to redefine their role vis-à-vis districts. The extent to which this new awareness has translated into clear changes in the patterns of interaction between counties and districts, however, remains unclear. The range of responses we got from district superintendents to the question of how helpful their county office was to their improvement efforts ranged all the way from very helpful to not helpful at all.

One of the important tensions we identified in relation to counties lies between the counties' claim for additional resources—they're being asked to do more with the same resources—and some unwillingness to simply hand off funding to counties with no accountability for results. In our view, a reasonable way to productively address the existing tension involves two key actions: 1) identifying key agreed upon measures of county effectiveness (perhaps some aggregated data from the Dashboard), and 2) conditioning the allocation of resources for county offices to the identification of key areas of improvement, the development of a coherent strategy for continuous improvement, and evidence of progress over time. This will likely incentivize counties to redefine their role and enhance transparency and trust within California's education sector.

Another important tension to deal with has to do with the double expectation that counties ensure compliance while providing assistance and support to districts. As mentioned earlier, counties face pressure from SBE and CCSESA to tighten the review of LCAPs to avoid lawsuits from advocacy groups. At the same time, they are now also expected to shift the nature of their relationship with districts from one of compliance to one of support and assistance for continuous improvement. In the longer run, measurable improvements in the quality and equity of student outcomes will likely mitigate the existing tensions that result from being accountable to advocacy groups on the one hand and to districts on the other. In the short run, however, this tension might require some immediate solutions on at least on two fronts. On the technical front, CDE in coordination with CCSESA should look at and disentangle the current set of expectations from counties. On the political front, channels of ongoing communication and dialogue with advocacy groups should be established or strengthened in order to communicate progress and identify and address concerns.

Recommendation Four: Leverage the Capacity of Successful Districts

An important and relatively untapped source of capacity for statewide improvement lies in some of California's most successful school districts. The state, indeed, features some of the best school districts in the nation. In our view, the expertise and know-how of superintendents and leadership teams in districts with a sustained trajectory of success should be leveraged to build and enhance the capacity of other districts, county offices and CCEE. The inclusion of superintendents from successful districts in advisory groups seems to be already common practice at the CDE. However, we believe district superintendents with demonstrated expertise and success could play an even larger role in advancing California's capacity building and continuous improvement agenda. This might involve opportunities to take on advisory roles in state level committees, as well as mentoring and capacity building roles in networks of districts or in partnerships with county offices or CCEE. This type of involvement of successful district leaders is likely to unleash a powerful capacity building movement across the state.

Historically, superintendents from successful districts have put most if not all of their energy at the service of their own districts, in many cases distancing themselves from CDE and counties. And many report that maintaining the trajectory of improvement in their districts demands their full time and attention. With this in mind, it may be necessary to create some external incentives and supports for

successful leaders to take on leadership and capacity building roles beyond their own districts. At the same time, the most powerful incentives will likely come from the sense of fulfillment that comes from expanding the reach of their influence and contributing to the advancement of a cause larger than their own district. As noted above, counties, CCEE and CDE are already inclined to move in this direction. It must be done carefully so that a culture of sharing and mutual benefit becomes the essence of the strategy.

Recommendation Five: Create Coordination and Coherence

The three intermediary agencies, together with other major stakeholders (e.g., the California Teachers' Association, ACSA, CSBA) have endorsed the overall direction set for education in California. This is a tremendous accomplishment in a system as massive and complex as California. At the same time, high levels of trust between CCEE and county offices have not yet been established. And yet, high trust is crucial to get to the levels of coordination and collaboration that are required to ensure that LCFF delivers on its promise of substantially better and more equitable student outcomes. The following quote from a leader in a research center in California captures the nature of the challenge of collaboration between intermediary agencies in the state:

"We have a system that is fragmented to an extent that's unusual. Each agency exists as its own center of power. There is no history or tradition of multiple agencies in California's education system working together. We're calling for something quite new. And the question is whether we can get independent agencies, which operate more or less like kingdoms, to see themselves not as just in charge of what happens in their kingdom, but as part of a larger system."

A related challenge is developing coherence—understood as shared mindsets around the nature of the work—across the entire education sector, which includes the definition of the nature of the roles and the coordination between CDE, CCEE and county offices. We have three main suggestions to enhance the coordination and coherence between these three intermediary agencies, to break existing siloes and cultivate the trust and shared commitment that will be required to move the needle on California's educational improvement.

As stated earlier, statements of what California is moving away from (compliance, punitive accountability) seem to have taken hold across the system to a larger extent than the clarity on what California is moving towards. Thus, our first suggestion is to *reposition LCAP as part and parcel of a local capacity building strategy*. Some of the bureaucratic compliance and sheer size problems of LCAP in its first three years have been addressed. It is now time to make a distinction between the LCAP approval document and the development of improvement protocols or tools for districts to engage in the actual work of improvement. In its current version, the LCAP is a tool to communicate the improvement decisions made by the district in consultation with key stakeholders. It is not an improvement tool. Thus, filling in the LCAP template is not the same as learning to improve. Doing the improvement work involves identifying core areas of need, examining their underlying causes, developing a working theory of action and its associated strategies, testing it in practice, assessing results, and refining the strategies over time. In the case of charter schools, the LCAP process and requirements should be comparable to that of school districts.

Also, we think that eight state priorities, two county priorities, and the more than 20 metrics that districts are required to address in their LCAP are too many. It should be possible to zero in on three

or so core priorities of special importance to the district while addressing the others as part of the whole set. We are not calling for and do not see the need for any legislative change in this respect, but there should be a shift in emphasis to focus on core priorities and to build the corresponding capacity that would address them.

As we discussed before, capacity building and continuous improvement have been key concepts used to name the new direction of the system, but the terms are rather vague and require a more precise definition accompanied by a clear articulation of what they look and feel like for practitioners in classrooms, schools and districts. The capacity and coherence vision also has to be directly linked to measurable, improved teaching and learning in classrooms. Some of the aspects just outlined might be present in some of the guiding documents created recently to name the new direction for California. But even if that is the case, they don't seem to have taken hold in the minds and hearts of most of the district superintendents we spoke with, and it is very likely that the new direction is even less visible for school principals, teachers, students and communities. And as we have argued elsewhere, coherence is only and purely subjective, which is to say that if it doesn't live in the minds and hearts of people, it does not exist.¹⁹ Bringing the new directional vision to life in the minds and hearts of educators, administrators, communities across the state and, importantly, within the very state agencies that advance this vision, is a fundamental part of developing a coherent and energized education sector.

The recently launched Dashboard has enormous potential to orient improvement efforts in districts and counties.²⁰ The clearer and more widespread the directional vision develops, the stronger the Dashboard will become as a tool for continuous improvement across the state.

Our second suggestion is *using specific cases or problems of practice for CDE, CCEE and counties to solve collaboratively through joint work organized in continuous cycles of inquiry*. If maximum impact on student outcomes is desired, cases/problems of practice should be directly connected to student learning and informed by Dashboard data. We know the three intermediary agencies already meet with some periodicity to let each other know about their work and to share information. More recently, the three agencies have participated in joint meetings to clarify roles, coordinate around, and provide input for the development of an integrated statewide system of support for Local Education Agencies (LEAs). The highest-yielding forms of collaboration, however, involve more than sharing information and coordinating activities. In particular, they require joint work around shared problems of practice. When done effectively, working jointly on common problems of practice facilitates the working through internal differences or tensions between groups, helps develop efficacy, and has measurable impact. This in turn feeds trust, builds internal accountability and enhances coherence.

Related to the second suggestion, our third suggestion is to *establish periodic work meetings with the three intermediary agencies that are facilitated by a high-level mediator*. Sharing information and coordinating activities might not require high-level mediation, but joint work around shared problems

¹⁹ Fullan, M., & Quinn (2016) *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

²⁰ Here again, important improvements need to be made to the Dashboard itself, including its user-friendliness (districts report having to click on multiple times to get to their actual results), the timeliness and currency of its data, and the clarity of its information for parents and communities.

of practice likely does. This is so because joint work might require bringing to the surface and working through underlying tensions between agencies. By high-level mediator we mean an organization or a few people who are kept in high esteem by all three agencies and who are positioned and able to call out flaws or failure to stick to shared commitments, offer candid feedback, bridge differences, and productively use and solve existing and emerging tensions. At first, the meetings might be focused on defining or redefining roles and processes of coordination but shortly after they should become a venue for joint work around shared problems of practice. Highly skilled facilitation is recommended as it should not be assumed that people know how to collaborate effectively or that it's just a matter of putting them together in a room. Indeed, the opposite is more likely the case. Effective collaboration, that is, collaboration that results in improved outcomes and the capacity to continuously get better is hard to achieve and skilled facilitation from an external expert is often crucial, especially at the beginning. While completing this report, we were informed that some work in this direction is already taking place, facilitated by WestEd.

Finally, we have not forced a specific definition on the relative roles of county offices and CCEE. Our view is that there is an enormous amount of capacity building required and that both agencies are needed. The gist of our recommendation for both is: engage in deliberate capacity building, communicate well with each other and the sector, do some joint work, and share ideas for improvement based on progress.

Recommendation Six: Secure the Sustainability of the California Way

"Stay the course" is the message we heard repeatedly across California's education sector with regards to local control. The following two excerpts from a county superintendent and a district superintendent capture a widely shared sense that California is onto something important and should stay on track.

"We need to stay the course, stick to what we have been doing until now. We've been talking about how LCAP is an opportunity for districts to tell their story, look at their needs, plan to do things that will have a positive impact. Personally, I'd be so disheartened if the new administration decided that they don't like this work. This is one of the best tools I've seen in 30 years in education to really make a difference in the educational trajectory of students. Time is what the challenge is and what we need." (County Superintendent)

"We've got to stay the course. Look at our nation: changing violently with each administration. We have to stay the course on certain things. We'll do wrong on our people and will be sending the wrong message if we change direction." (District Superintendent)

There is among the leaders we interviewed a widely shared perception that California is moving in the right direction and that more time is needed for local control to have its intended effects. With not much more than a year left in Governor Jerry Brown's administration, there are important pieces that need to be in place to increase the chances of continuation for LCFF and the new direction California is embarked on. Here we list four of the most important areas that require deliberate attention and strategizing to secure LCFF's sustainability.

Intentionally capture and publicize progress. The impact of LCFF so far needs to be articulated in clear and specific ways (see earlier section on Capacity Building and Continuous Improvement). This requires an intentional effort to capture what has been done and what are the results so far.

Identifying and publicizing early gains in some core indicators is an important part of this effort. For example, the recently released increase in student achievement as measured by the CAASPP and the 7-year trajectory of continued increase in high school graduation rates, with faster improvements among English Learners, African American and Latino students, are very important accomplishments that need to be widely publicized. But equally and perhaps more important is to identify key work that remains to be done (for example, further closing achievement gaps), articulate a specific response as to why this is the case, and develop and communicate a clear strategy to move key indicators up. An additional measure of progress that can be politically appealing and captured with relative ease is the level of agreement among key stakeholders and the public at large that California's education sector is moving in the right direction. Of special importance will be deliberately creating channels of communication to discuss progress and concerns with legislators and advocacy groups who are growing increasingly vocal in their criticisms of LCFF.

Secure the necessary funding. Governor Jerry Brown has been a major champion of local control and was able to secure the necessary funding for LCFF through a strong relationship with the legislature. Intentional efforts should be made to secure continued and increased funding for California's education sector. Despite its recent increased education funding, California continues to be one of the states with lowest per pupil expenditure in the nation, and many districts are facing the challenge of absorbing the rising costs of teacher retirement. With regards to LCFF's supplemental funds, two major issues deserve revision: First, the inclusion of students with disabilities in the supplemental count; and second, identifying a solution to securing sufficient funding for those districts with low percentages of students in poverty, English Learners, or youth in foster care who end up being funded significantly below the funding average for daily attendance relative to their average comparable district.

Do the political work. As identified by the leaders we talked with, the most prominent areas of political work to increase the chances for 'staying the course' beyond Governor Jerry Brown's tenure include: a) nurturing as broad a network of supporters of the current direction and strategy for California's education sector—including advocacy groups, legislators, community organizations, counties, and school districts; b) pursuing Governor Jerry Brown's attention to securing a serious revenue solution for education in California with and through the legislature—some are suggesting that he is perhaps the only person who can realistically accomplish this; c) continue to use ESSA as a tool to build state capacity for publicly funded schools that address equity and excellence.

Address the teacher shortage problem. The number of teachers in California is in decline and the growing tendency to respond to the shortage by hiring teachers not fully credentialed represents a very costly and ultimately unsustainable solution. A recent report by the Learning Policy Institute²¹ found that the worrying trends identified in 2016, when three in every four districts were experiencing teacher shortages, "have worsened in the past year, with especially severe consequences in special education, mathematics and science, and significant threats to bilingual education." With not enough teachers, and not enough good teachers, no whole system reform strategy will work, no matter how sophisticated and well designed. The good news is that there are easy and proven solutions to solving the teacher shortage problem. Desiree Carver-Thomas and Linda Darling Hammond have

²¹ Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017) Addressing California's Growing Teacher Shortage: 2017 Update. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from: learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-teacher-shortage-2017-update

articulated what an effective solution looks like. In order to booster supply quickly, without compromising on teacher quality, they offer three core recommendations, which involve: creating financial incentives for teacher candidates who commit to teach in high-need fields and locations; establishing high-retention teacher preparation programs completed in one year at the post-baccalaureate level; and eliminating barriers to re-entry or postpone the exit of retired teachers in shortage fields. If looked at and addressed properly, the teacher shortage problem can be resolved in two to three years.

Realizing California's Golden Opportunity

In the current times of political turmoil and volatility, California has the moral stature and a golden opportunity to lead the way in the nation towards prosperity, democracy and social justice. Education plays a pivotal role in this endeavor and ensuring that the vision of local control translates into substantially better and more equitable student outcomes is more important than ever. This year will be a crucial time to demonstrate that *The California Way* is indeed a better way, and to establish the foundations for the continued improvement that California's education sector needs to cultivate and strengthen over the longer run. In this report, we have pointed to the importance of developing and continuously testing and refining a working theory of action that causes improved teaching and learning and is grounded on the assumption that when change is not occurring it is more likely because people don't know how to do things differently. We have suggested that the State Board of Education and CDE have to define a clear and inspiring directional vision for California and ensure its widespread ownership. We argued that the status of capacity for improvement has to be better understood and seriously enhanced. This requires clarifying and updating the role of CCEE so that this small agency is used strategically to enhance the capacity for improvement of districts and counties across the state. It also requires redefining the role and building the capacity of county offices to support the continuous improvement of districts as well as leveraging the existing capacity and leadership of successful districts and counties. Finally, we have offered suggestions to clarify and enhance the roles and coordination between CDE, CCEE and county offices and to secure the sustainability of LCFF over the long run.

The future in California is exciting. It is also precarious. In our current work in California we find that good people are worried. And when good people are worried they role up their sleeves, solve problems and make progress!

Acknowledgements

We are immersed in the transformation of California education in so many ways that it is impossible to thank all those who influenced this report. For starters, the Stuart Foundation is our main funder and has been a fundamental supporter of so many components of what is happening in the state. We can only say that it is making a big difference in the lives of educators, students, and families. We thank the countless schools, districts, and agencies that have helped with the ideas in this report.

We also thank the leaders of the various agencies who agreed to be interviewed and unreservedly helped with arrangements: Glen Price (CDE), Peter Birdsall (CCSESA), Eric Heins (CTA), Carl Cohn (CCEE). We also thank Wes Smith (ACSA) and Vernon Billy (CSBA) for their support. Several others gave us direct feedback: Davis Campbell, Dave Gordon, Linda Darling Hammond, Carlye Olsen, Mickey Porter, Laura Schwalm, and Sandy Thorstenson. Our magnificent team helped in so many different ways: Eleanor Adam, Claudia Cuttress, Mary Jean Gallagher, Bill Hogarth, Joanne Quinn, and Joelle Rodway.

Of course, we take responsibility for the final report, but we know it is immensely better from the input we received.

Glossary of Acronyms

ACITF	Advisory Task Force for Accountability and Continuous Improvement
ACSA	Association of California School Administrators
ADA	Average Daily Attendance
API	Academic Performance Index
CAASPP	California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress
CCEE	California Collaborative for Educational Excellence
CCSESA	California County Superintendents Educational Services Association
CCSS	Common Core State Standards
CDE	California Department of Education
CFT	California Federation of Teachers
CSBA	California School Boards Association
CSU	California State University
CTA	California Teachers Association
EL	English Language Learner
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
FPM	Federal Program Monitoring
LCAP	Local Control and Accountability Plan
LCFF	Local Control Funding Formula
LEA	Local Education Agency
LftM	Leadership from the Middle
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PSAA	Public School Accountability Act
SBAC	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium
SBE	State Board of Education

Note

This is the fourth in a series of periodic documents about the evolution of California's LCFF/LCAP reform system. The three previous reports were:

1. California's Golden Opportunity: A Status Note
Michael Fullan & Team
November 2014
2. A Golden Opportunity: The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence as a Force for Positive Change
Michael Fullan & Team and California Forward
January 2015
3. California's Golden Opportunity: LCAP's Theory of Action—Problems and Corrections
Michael Fullan & Team
July 2015

This material is published by Michael Fullan and Team (see www.michaelfullan.ca), and supported by the Stuart Foundation.