CALIFORNIA**COLLABORATIVE**
on District Reform

Policy and Practice Brief

Implementing LCFF:

Early Lessons From the Field

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About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

Just one year old, the Local Control Funding Formula[1] (LCFF) represents a fundamental transformation of the way California allocates state funds to school districts and the ways the state expects districts to make decisions about (and report on) the use of these funds. The deadline for districts to submit their first-ever Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), in which they set out such decisions, was June 30, 2014. Already by midspring, however, lessons were beginning to emerge.

A central motivation for the creation of LCFF was the desire to allocate resources more equitably in California schools. Early experiences from district leaders in the California Collaborative on District Reform suggest that the new policy does, in fact, free them to act more coherently to meet the needs of underserved students. Moreover, reflections from district leaders indicate that LCFF has genuinely affected approaches to planning and resource allocation in California Collaborative member districts. These leaders reported reexamining existing strategies rather than simply repackaging prior approaches to meet the requirements of the LCAP template. (Examples include collecting and reporting new forms of data—such as middle school dropouts and suspensions—and explicitly targeting services to foster youth for the first time.) In other words, these districts are not using the LCAP as merely an exercise in compliance, but rather as a tool to aid in the process of continuous reflection and improvement.

This is the first in a series of short briefs that aims to capture some key themes emerging from the LCAP development process, including some of the key challenges that California educators still need to address as they work to fulfill the promise of the new funding system. It identifies some early lessons that emerged from an April 2014 meeting of the California Collaborative and previews some of the topics we will explore in more detail through subsequent briefs.

[1] For background on LCFF, please refer to http://lcff.childrennow.org/about.

Recognize and Adapt to the Wide Variation in District Contexts

As the California education community seeks to support and hold districts accountable for progress, it must understand the wide variation among districts. The levels of LCFF awareness inside and outside the central office, the level of engagement from a range of community members, the presence of organized groups in the community, the emphasis on LCAP development relative to other district priorities (such as implementation of the Common Core State Standards), and the capacity to navigate change can differ from district to district. The ideas, expectations, and supports for facilitating LCFF implementation must therefore be adapted to these various contexts.

Maintain a Focus on Teaching and Learning

Conversations about the LCAP necessarily revolve around resource allocation. Although money is important, the bottom line for school improvement is success for students. Consequently, any discussion about LCFF and the LCAP must fundamentally target students' classroom learning opportunities—particularly English learners, students of poverty, and foster youth, who traditionally experience opportunity gaps and whose needs the new funding system is designed to address. Attention to programmatic changes and the flow of resources must therefore be accompanied by attention to quality. Districts may receive pressure to increase funding for programs that are *designed* to improve opportunities for students targeted with LCFF funds, but with insufficient attention paid to whether these programs have been effective at enhancing student learning. As one district leader observed, "Investing more money into what isn't working well now won't make it better."

The deliberate integration of Common Core implementation efforts and LCAP development can help support this focus on teaching and learning. Although the California State Board of Education has defined the Common Core as one of the state's eight priority areas, identifying the standards as merely one of eight areas of focus understates the important role they can play in driving district improvement. For example, when implemented well as a vehicle for high-quality instruction, the new standards should provide an anchor for improving student achievement, student engagement, and other student outcomes. If the Common Core is the thread uniting efforts to improve teaching and learning and define more equitable opportunities for students, it is critical that district leaders make the connection between these standards and resource allocation decisions.

Build Capacity at All Levels of the System to Meet New Expectations

An expansion in local autonomy that revolves around teaching and learning calls for a major shift in the roles of many central office administrators. LCFF alters not only the ways in which the state distributes money, but also the way districts allocate central office resources to programs and services, how they distribute funds to schools, and how schools plan and allocate available resources to programs and services at the site level. These changes call for a shift from ensuring compliance with categorical requirements to supporting successful performance. For example, administrators accustomed to training principals on the proper assignment of budget codes may find that their role has evolved to require more professional judgment as they help principals design school budgets to strengthen a coherent instructional program.

Capacity building is therefore an extremely important component of LCFF implementation. Education systems will succeed only to the extent that individuals within them master the demands of their evolving roles. This transition is difficult and will take time. As one meeting participant observed, "We're really good at telling people what to do. We're not good at telling them how. If there's no capacity building, we could be dumping all these new resources into things that aren't going to work." The learning needs do not end with the central office, either.

LCFF requires a shift in roles within schools, at the county and state levels, and among community members; capacity building needs to happen at these levels as well.

Anticipate, Tolerate, and Learn From Inevitable Early Stumbles

Because of the learning required for individuals and systems, stakeholders around the state should prepare for the inevitable stumbles that will occur as part of LCFF implementation. Building capacity will take time and sustained effort, and because the new system creates space for innovation, some (and perhaps many) new ideas will fail. Of course, this reality may present a difficult sell to those who supported LCFF on the promise of new resources for schools and better outcomes for students. And a call for tolerance and understanding may not be well received in communities where people have already watched districts stumble for years. District leaders, policymakers, and advocates can help the range of constituencies in the public education sphere understand what a complete picture of progress will entail, and to support districts through the process. As one district leader stated, "We need permission to stumble, but no one is granted permission to fail.... We need to make sure that we don't let others fail."

Meaningfully Engage the Community

One of the highest profile elements of the LCAP template is the call for community engagement in district planning processes. Each district, however, has its own history of—and infrastructure for—community engagement. One district may feature organized community groups that mobilize parents for hours of public comment at school board meetings, and its neighbor may serve a population in which parents are reticent to tell the district what to do. Although effective engagement in any context should focus on student learning, wide variation across districts means that notions of "community" and "engagement" may differ, and that each district may require a distinct approach.

Success in this component of LCFF implementation will require stakeholders to unpack exactly what "community" means, and to address a range of voices that may extend beyond the people and organizations that usually participate in board of education meetings—especially students and parents. Likewise, effective engagement is not defined by negotiation over budget line items, but by partnerships in which all constituencies see their mutual involvement as a collective benefit and a shared responsibility. Building trust, fostering healthy communication, and managing expectations to meet this ideal represent important challenges for the LCFF implementation process.

Communicate to Facilitate Success

In a sea of new regulations, roles, expectations, and opportunities, conscious attention to messaging and strategic communication is critical. As with resource allocation, messaging about LCFF needs to center on students. Instead, messaging often focuses on spending, and dialogue frequently revolves around the protection of programs and jobs that provide adults in the system with greater comfort and security. Framing the conversation around adults rather than students can distract from the decisions and outcomes that matter most—those that revolve around teaching and learning and improved student performance.

Just as communication needs to help build tolerance for stumbles during implementation, it also needs to reflect the reality of the timeline and funding picture. Conversations about LCFF have been under way for some time, of course. The new funding system promised more funding and flexibility, and many individuals and groups have sought a share that ensures the protection of their own interests. In some ways, this emphasis on new money is the byproduct of successful political marketing. The education community and its allies successfully secured support for Proposition 30 and LCFF because they promised more money for schools. The reality, however, is that not all schools and districts will see increases, and

The California Collaborative on District Reform and LCFF

Almost since its inception, the California Collaborative on District Reform has engaged in efforts to increase local flexibility so that districts can better meet the needs of their students. These efforts began with a series of briefs produced for the *Getting From Facts to Policy* convening (hosted by EdSource in fall 2007), continued as a thread running through member meetings and policy activities for the next few years, and culminated with our work to inform and support the passage of the new LCFF in 2013. An April 2014 meeting of the California Collaborative brought members together at a critical stage in the early implementation of LCFF—the creation of districts' first LCAPs—and explored early experiences with LCAP development. For resources from that meeting, including a full summary of the dialogue, please visit http://cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting24.

community expectations for programs and services may exceed what new funds can support. Districts might consider, for example, publishing the cost of each community recommendation next to the actual dollars available for the upcoming school year to help all stakeholders understand the priorities and trade-offs that affect resource allocation. Transparency can help bridge the gap between initial expectations and reality, and it may help people feel heard, even if they do not get everything they requested.

Beyond the content of communication, the ways in which this communication needs to take place merit careful thought and attention. This includes multidirectional communication in which district leaders work not only to inform their schools and local communities, but also to gather information from school sites about the supports they need. In addition, the use of differentiated and multifaceted communication strategies can help district leaders acknowledge and address multiple audiences with distinct access points, background knowledge, and priorities. Just as there is no uniform "community," there is no uniform message that will speak effectively to all of a district's target audiences.

Conclusion

LCFF introduces exciting new changes to the California education landscape that can position districts to better meet the needs of all students, particularly the traditionally underserved. With these changes comes a tremendous learning curve at all levels of the system, a process made more difficult by the wide variation in district contexts. By sharing early struggles and promising approaches, stakeholders at all levels might accelerate the learning process and better position California to achieve the equity promises of the new funding policy.

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For more information about the Collaborative and its work, visit www.cacollaborative.org.

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