CALIFORNIA**COLLABORATIVE**
on District Reform

Policy and Practice Brief

Implementing LCFF:

Communicating About District Plans

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About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of 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.

After nearly three years of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), California educators still struggle to communicate district plans to parents, teachers, and other members of the school community. Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), state-mandated LCFF documents presenting districts' spending and programmatic decisions, have ballooned into jargon-laden stacks of tables well over 100 pages long, impenetrable to all but the most sophisticated reader. Envisioned as a tool to improve transparency, the LCAP as implemented has instead left many parents and community members utterly confused.

Several problems have led to these transparency challenges. First, multiple constituencies with different—and sometimes conflicting—goals have all pushed the designers of the LCAP to keep adding more information. The LCAP is expected to simultaneously act as a strategic planning document, a vehicle for community engagement, a budgeting tool to align local spending with state priorities, a verification that resource allocation decisions benefit targeted student populations, and a source of accountability for both inputs and outcomes. As a document intended to accomplish all of these things, the LCAP does none of them well. At the same time, an ingrained compliance orientation that builds on a legacy of overregulation pushes districts to heavily document all decisions. On top of these challenges, the LCAP template allows little room to explain the district's broad strategy for improvement—the vision behind the plan.

This brief is the fourth in a series from the California Collaborative on District Reform exploring key issues of LCFF implementation. It draws primarily on conversations that took place during a November 2015 meeting of the California Collaborative, which brought together members and invited guests from the policy, practice, and advocacy communities who have been deeply engaged with development, approval, and communication efforts around district LCAPs. For additional resources on LCFF, please visit http://www.cacollaborative.org/topics/school-finance.

In recognition of the LCAP's issues, state and district leaders are looking for better ways to inform the community about districts' plans and results. Many districts voluntarily produced supplemental materials to accompany their 2015 LCAP, and the State Board of Education (SBE) is considering "executive summaries" as one solution. Whether a formal requirement for these materials emerges or not, the call for effective communication needs attention. What does a good executive summary or other outreach approach look like? What is its purpose, and what strategies would achieve that purpose?

The purpose of this brief is to inform district leaders as they communicate about their overall vision for school improvement, and the strategies and resource allocation decisions they are using to achieve that vision. It highlights insights that emerged from a November 2015 meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform, in which participants reviewed resources already in use in the field—a sample of executive summaries, infographics, and other communication materials.[1] As California continues to refine the LCFF system of policies and practices, these guidelines can help districts further the goals LCFF was designed to foster.

Why Is Effective Communication About the LCAP So Important?

Well-crafted communication efforts, whether part of the LCAP or not, create opportunities to achieve the LCFF goals of engagement and transparency.

Communicate to Engage the Community

A key intent of LCFF is to promote authentic engagement between districts and the communities they serve. Indeed, the LCAP template stipulates that "meaningful engagement of parents, pupils, and other stakeholders…is critical to the LCAP budget and process," and requires districts to "describe the process used to consult with parents, pupils, school personnel, local bargaining units as applicable, and the community" and explain "how this consultation contributed to the development of the LCAP or annual update." The language emphasizes that districts are to treat community members as partners in the planning process—and are to actively communicate the results of that process.

[1] The November 2015 meeting explored many of the challenges with the LCAP overall and solutions to address them. A January 2015 brief, *Implementing LCFF: Possible Solutions to Emergent LCAP Challenges*, identifies the challenges and poses potential revisions to the LCAP template and process: http://www.cacollaborative.org/publication/implementing-lcff-possible-solutions-emergent-lcap-challenges

Meaningful engagement requires that community members be able to see how their input has been reflected in district strategies and actions, and if it is not reflected, the reasons why. They need to understand the district's goals and how the district intends to reach those goals. Just as importantly, the district staff tasked with making plans a reality must understand the plans' details and the rationale behind them in order to successfully implement them.

Communicate to Achieve Transparency

Another goal guiding LCFF development is to promote transparency about district programming and resource allocation decisions. As stewards of public dollars, school systems need to demonstrate that they are using taxpayer money for its intended purposes and recipients. For all the flaws of the categorical programs that preceded California's new funding system, the extensive regulations and compliance mechanisms that surrounded them created a concrete data trail of how districts allocated resources to the students targeted by those interventions. Absent the assurances these systems provide, a long-running undercurrent of distrust of local districts by some of their stakeholders has come into sharper focus: If decades of education reform have failed to meaningfully close achievement gaps between English learners (ELs), low-income students, and foster youth and their more advantaged peers, how can we trust districts to make the right decisions now?

Designers of the LCAP therefore sought to ensure that local districts make clear the connections among state and district goals, local programmatic decisions, and spending. By requiring districts to identify where they spend money, the state enables county offices of education to monitor the inputs of district action. A particular focus here is on equity and ensuring that underserved students—especially the ELs, low-income students, and foster youth for whom the state provides additional funding—receive needed services. By creating an annual update and a forthcoming evaluation rubric, the state also will allow county offices of education to monitor district progress in actually moving students toward success.

Is the Current LCAP Document Facilitating Communication as Intended?

The LCAP was supposed to be the tool that delivered LCFF's promised transparency and engendered public engagement in decision making—it was intended to be the vehicle for communicating with the community about where the district is going and how it intends to get there. Despite these good intentions, the LCAP document as it currently exists often obscures rather than highlights the important elements of district plans. The range of purposes that stakeholders have attached to it have led to overwhelming levels of detail that require insider knowledge to understand. In their efforts to improve transparency by providing comprehensive budgeting and programmatic details, designers and implementers of the LCAP have actually reduced transparency.

How Can Districts Communicate About the LCAP More Effectively?

Many districts have responded to communication challenges by developing their own supplemental materials; executive summaries have emerged as one strategy for making LCAP information more accessible. District approaches vary widely, and little information exists in the field about how to create

useful documents or outreach materials. As districts explore ways to share news about their work—through LCAP-related materials and through other vehicles, such as social media and community meetings—the following suggested guidelines might be useful:

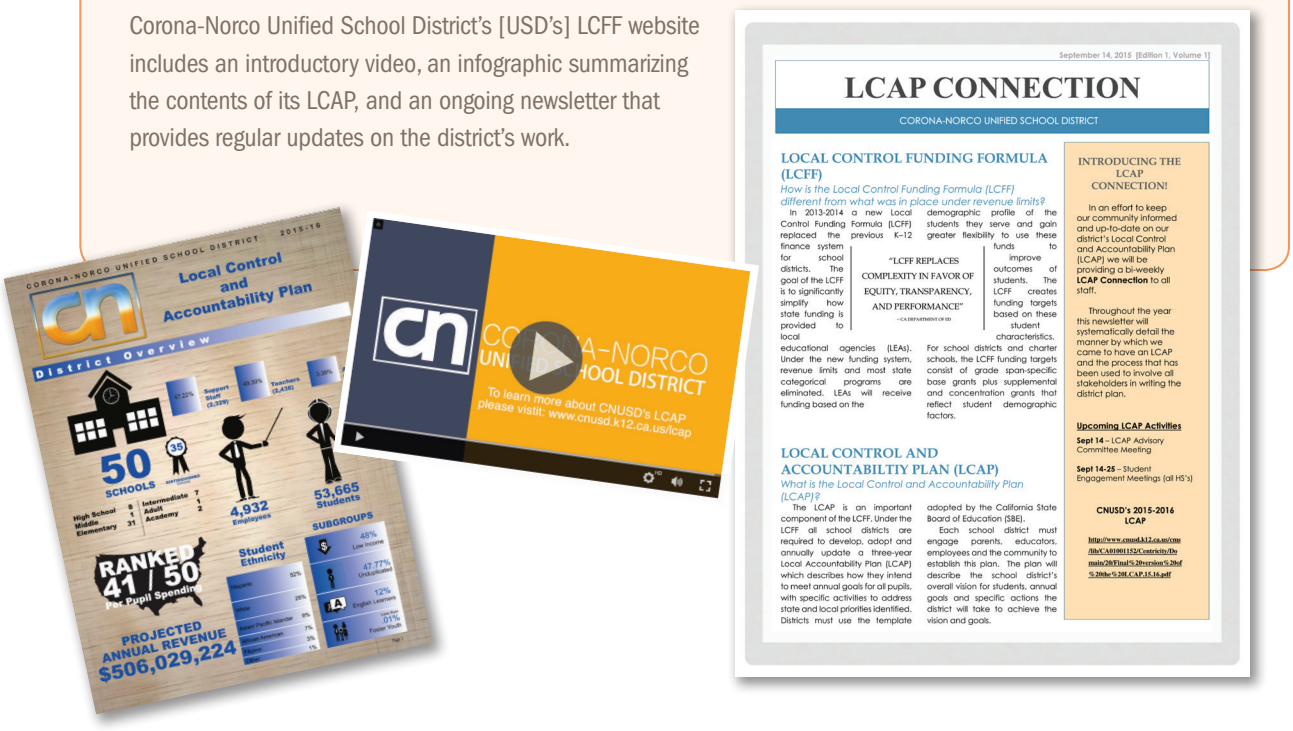
- Identify and target specific audiences
- Consider multiple modes of communication for different purposes and audiences
- Include the information community members need to make sense of the plan
- Make the language and presentation accessible to the intended audience
- Avoid common communication pitfalls

Identify and Target Specific Audiences

Different stakeholders seek different kinds of information and levels of detail. For the largest district audience—parents—the important information may be fairly straightforward: Is my child getting a good education? Where is the district thriving, where is it struggling, and what is it doing in response? For civil rights advocacy organizations trying to ensure that districts are allocating resources to meet the LCFF system's equity goals, the content may need to have a different emphasis and is likely to be far more detailed. And audiences of district employees and state policymakers may require yet other foci and formats pertinent to the work of those groups. Districts may thus need to develop multiple materials (or use multiple formats) to meet the needs of various community groups. Translation into languages beyond English should be part of this approach—especially to reach parents of ELs, a group of students whose academic needs are an LCFF focal point.

Examples From the Field: Multiple Modes of Communication

Corona-Norco Unified School District's [USD's] LCFF website includes an introductory video, an infographic summarizing the contents of its LCAP, and an ongoing newsletter that provides regular updates on the district's work.



Consider Multiple Modes of Communication for Different Purposes and Audiences

Just as different audiences may benefit from different materials, districts should consider multiple modes of communication. Text-based documents like executive summaries may be one part of a district's communication strategy, but video, text messages, and other platforms for sharing a district's message can help deepen the community's understanding of the LCAP and ability to contribute to the ongoing process of improvement. To help integrate LCAP-related communication with other messaging from the central office, districts can leverage existing forms of outreach (for example, staff or parent newsletters, outreach to registered voters, and the district's website). District leaders can also consider messengers outside of the central office. For example, parents often turn to one another as trusted sources of information; districts can look for ways to leverage parent networks to help communicate. It may be that for audiences looking to understand the intricacies of a district's plan, a written product is not as useful as a meeting in which district leaders explain their approach in detail and respond to questions in person, in real time.

Include the Information That Community Members Need

District communication materials should focus on the right information. The temptation may be strong to summarize only the contents of the LCAP, but districts do not exist for the purpose of developing LCAPs—they exist to educate students. Materials should instead emphasize the big picture: How is my school or district doing at educating students?

Examples From the Field: Alignment of Resource Allocation Decisions to District Goals

Fresno USD's executive summary identifies key investments from its LCAP, including the dollar amount for each, and connects each one to one of the district's four main goals, helping readers understand how budget decisions relate to the things it is trying to accomplish. Fresno's 2016–17 executive summary also shines light on changes over time by explaining whether funding amounts are continuations of previous investments or are new or expanded investments.

Districts can further strengthen an approach like this by not simply connecting the expenditures to the goals, but also providing the rationale—whether through language in the document or links to another source—for *how* the expenditures advance those goals.

To describe the big picture, districts need to connect the dots for the audience. The examples in this brief point to some ways districts can do this:

Alignment of resource allocation decisions to district goals. The LCAP and the summary materials that accompany it may list programs and expenses, but what is the rationale behind these decisions? How do the related strategies work together to support the goals?

Approach to equity. There may be supplemental and concentration funds targeting underserved students, but what is the district's overall approach to equity? And how does the district's use of base funding also contribute to equity goals?

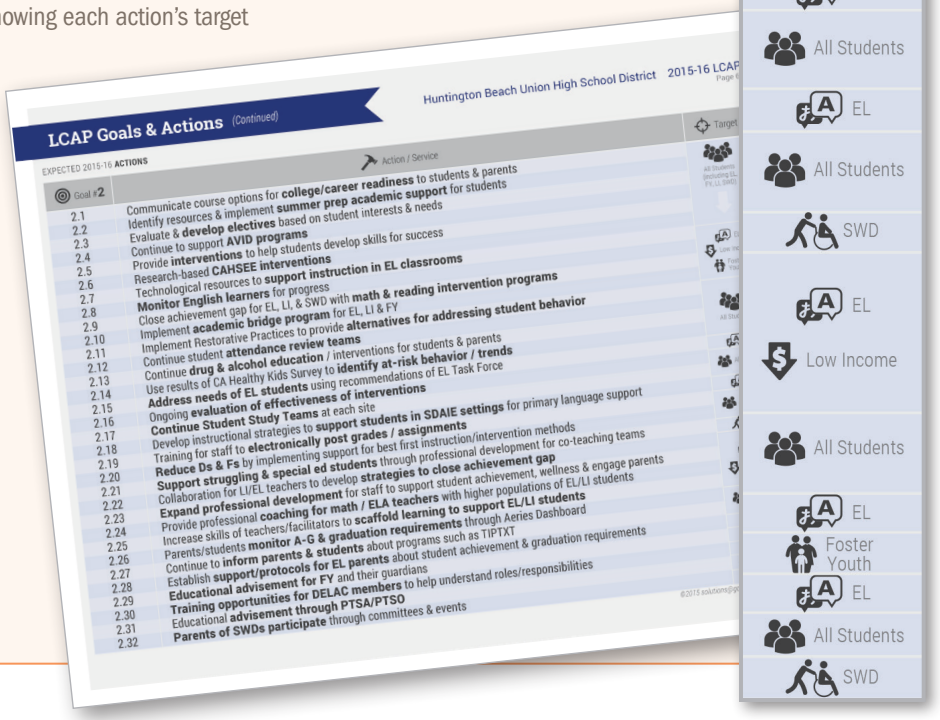
Examples From the Field: Approach to Equity

Several communications materials describe a district's student population and even outline the supplemental and concentration funds a district receives to meet the needs of its low-income students, ELs, and foster youth. Few districts, however, produce materials that articulate an overall strategy to meeting the needs of underserved students. In San Bernardino USD, where 90 percent of students are low income and 27 percent are ELs, the executive summary does include this statement:

> Across the six [district] goals there is a consistent reference to "all" students. As one of California's most diverse school districts, consideration of "all" students requires attending to unique learning needs related to poverty, race, and language. The LCAP describes how we will focus existing programs, expand or increase services, and develop partnerships to meet the needs and deliver on the promise of "making hope happen" for every child in our community.

Some districts provide an indication of which activities and programs are designed to meet the needs of which targeted subgroups. This list of activities from a Huntington Beach Union High School District infographic includes a column showing each action's target student population. For example, Goal 2.15 is to "address needs of EL students using recommendations of EL Task Force," and the column on the right shows that it targets ELs.

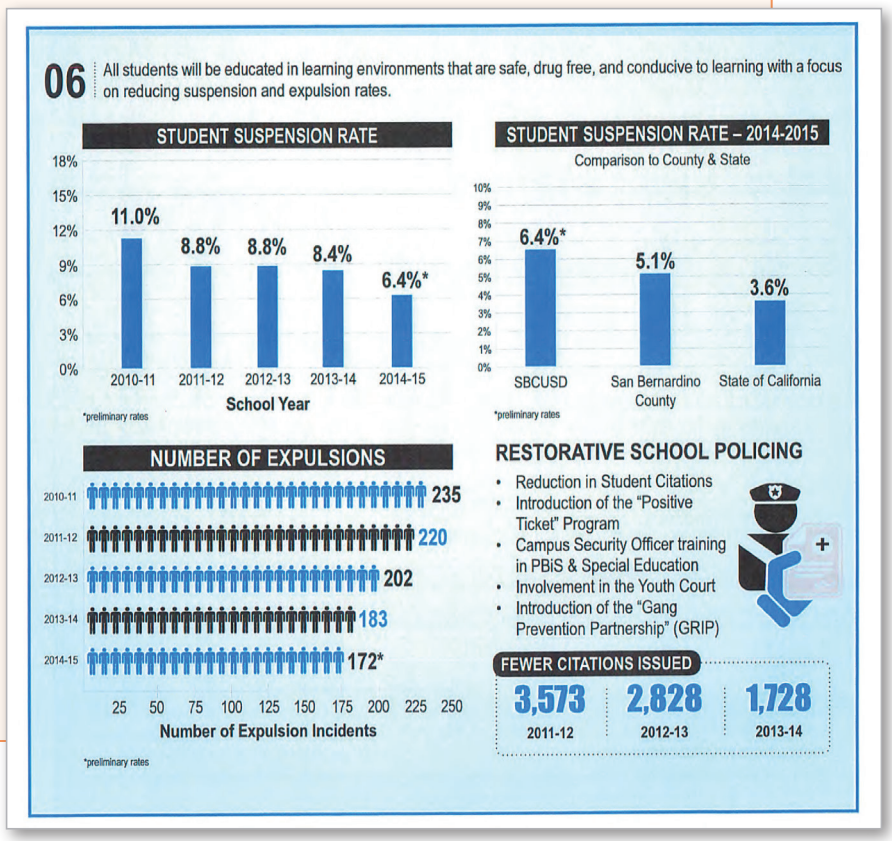
In both examples, the districts could strengthen their messaging by articulating the rationale behind specific strategies and describing the district's overall philosophy guiding its work with traditionally underserved students.



Examples From the Field: District Trajectory Over Time

San Bernardino USD's executive summary shows student suspensions, expulsions, and citations over time to help provide a sense of the district's progress. Comparisons to county and state figures give further context for the district's results.

In addition to trajectories of student outcomes leading up to the current year, districts might improve their messaging about next steps by including specific targets for improvement in the upcoming school year and the strategies for meeting those targets.



Examples From the Field: Incorporation of Community Input

None of the materials we reviewed included extensive information about the input that stakeholders had provided and the ways in which the LCAP reflected that input. However, the Orange USD executive summary did include this rationale for components of the district's plan:

> The overwhelming response from the community was to focus on the social-emotional aspects of student learning and improve student engagement and connectedness. Section 2 and 3 of the LCAP provide detailed descriptors of the actions and services proposed to meet these needs.

The San Jose USD executive summary has a similar description, with an added connection to the overall district budget:

> In alignment with the strategic plan and as articulated in the LCAP, San Jose Unified continues to invest heavily in the two priority objectives identified by the community—high-quality staff and high-quality academics. Combined, these objectives command 87% of the school district's LCAP funding.

Districts can strengthen their community engagement and communications efforts by summarizing the input they have received from various community members and by making explicit how that input has shaped their plans.

District trajectory over time. Where does the district stand in its overall improvement trajectory? Where was the district before, where is it now, and what are the next steps?

Incorporation of community input. It may be useful to describe community engagement activities, but what did the district learn from those efforts? How is the input from these activities reflected in the district's plans?

Finally, to ensure that accessibility does not come at the expense of transparency, summary materials can include references and links to original sources that readers can explore for more information. The summary materials can act as an overview and can be an entry point into comprehensive information about the LCAP.

Make the Language and Presentation Accessible to the Intended Audience

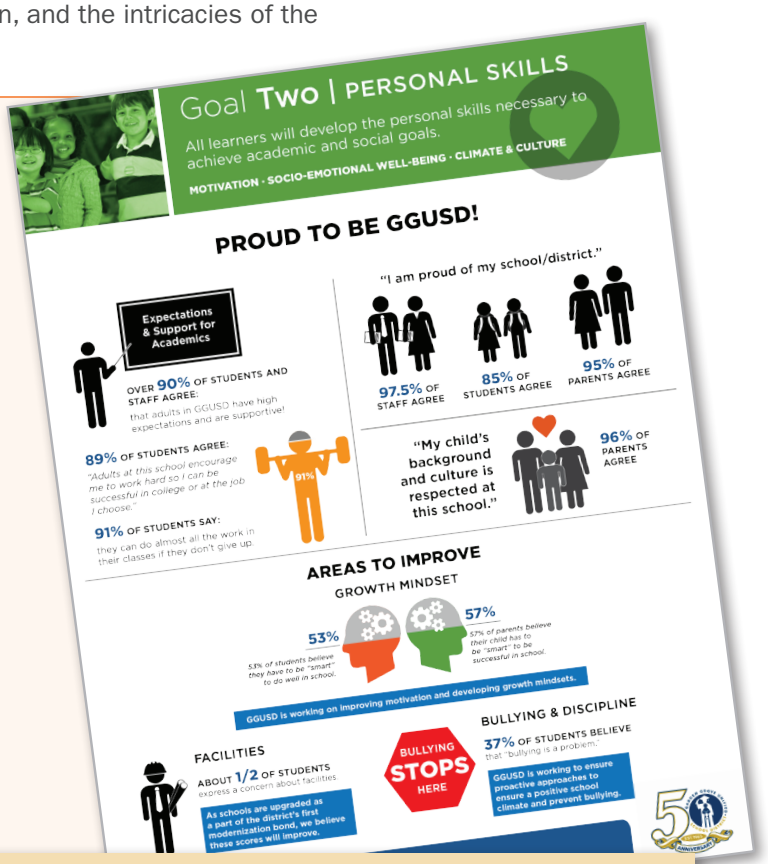
If communication is to be effective, community members need to understand the content of various outreach materials. Simplicity is key. Parents rarely have the time or background to navigate long documents peppered with acronyms, other jargon, and the intricacies of the

Examples From the Field: Accessible Language and Presentation

Garden Grove USD released an annual report for the 2015–16 school year. Although the document is not explicitly tied to the LCAP, it lays out information clearly and succinctly by providing an overview of the district's mission and vision, then devoting a page to each of the district's three goals. On each page, the report lists the goal, provides evidence of progress, and identifies areas to improve. Throughout the document, the district uses conversational language that make the materials accessible to a wide range of readers.

A glossary or link to help the reader understand a term like "growth mindset" could further improve the report's accessibility.

For example, an infographic from West Contra Costa USD includes a list of acronyms to help readers understand the terminology used within the document.



KEY ACRONYMS

AP - Advanced Placement
CAHSEE- California High School Exit Exam
CBO - Community Based Organization
CCSS - Common Core State Standards
CELDT - CA English Language Development Test
CHKS - CA Healthy Kids Survey
ELA - English Language Arts
EL or ELL - English Language Learner
K–3 - Kindergarten through 3rd Grade
LCAP - Local Control Accountability Plan
LCFF - Local Control Funding Formula
TK - Transitional Kindergarten

Where Do the Examples in This Brief Come From?

To explore communications resources at the Collaborative's November 2015 meeting and to identify examples of current practices for this brief, Collaborative staff searched for a range of materials from districts across the state. The examples provided here are excerpts from executive summaries and other publications shared by Collaborative members, an advisory list from SBE staff, and internet searches. Communication efforts around the LCAP are a work in progress, and districts continue to learn the best ways to engage parents and the community. All of the materials we reviewed could be improved; the examples here offer some promising practices on which districts can build.

budgeting process. By avoiding "education speak" and limiting written documents to five or fewer pages, districts can help parents and others read and digest the most important takeaways.

Districts can also look for ways to catch people's attention—color and graphics can help with this effort—as long as methods for doing so help the audience understand key information. Infographics, for example, should help illustrate key points, but may need explanatory text in order to do so.

Sharing preliminary drafts with "test audiences" of parents and other stakeholders can help districts identify and resolve potential areas of confusion before publishing materials and beginning formal dissemination.

Avoid Common Pitfalls

Common missteps can undermine the effectiveness of executive summaries and other communications materials. Several cautions are in order.

Too much information can overwhelm the audience. Districts can unintentionally drown parents and others in information. Efforts to improve transparency can produce reams of paper that parents and others struggle to navigate. Even creating multiple vehicles for communication—a strategy highlighted earlier in this brief—can create confusion if the end user does not understand how to navigate them and how they relate to each other. Consistency across platforms is also important to ensure that the same underlying message comes through in all communications materials, even as the specific pieces of information vary depending on the audience. At the same time, districts should be careful not to try to do too much; links to additional information can help resist the temptation to include everything in one location.

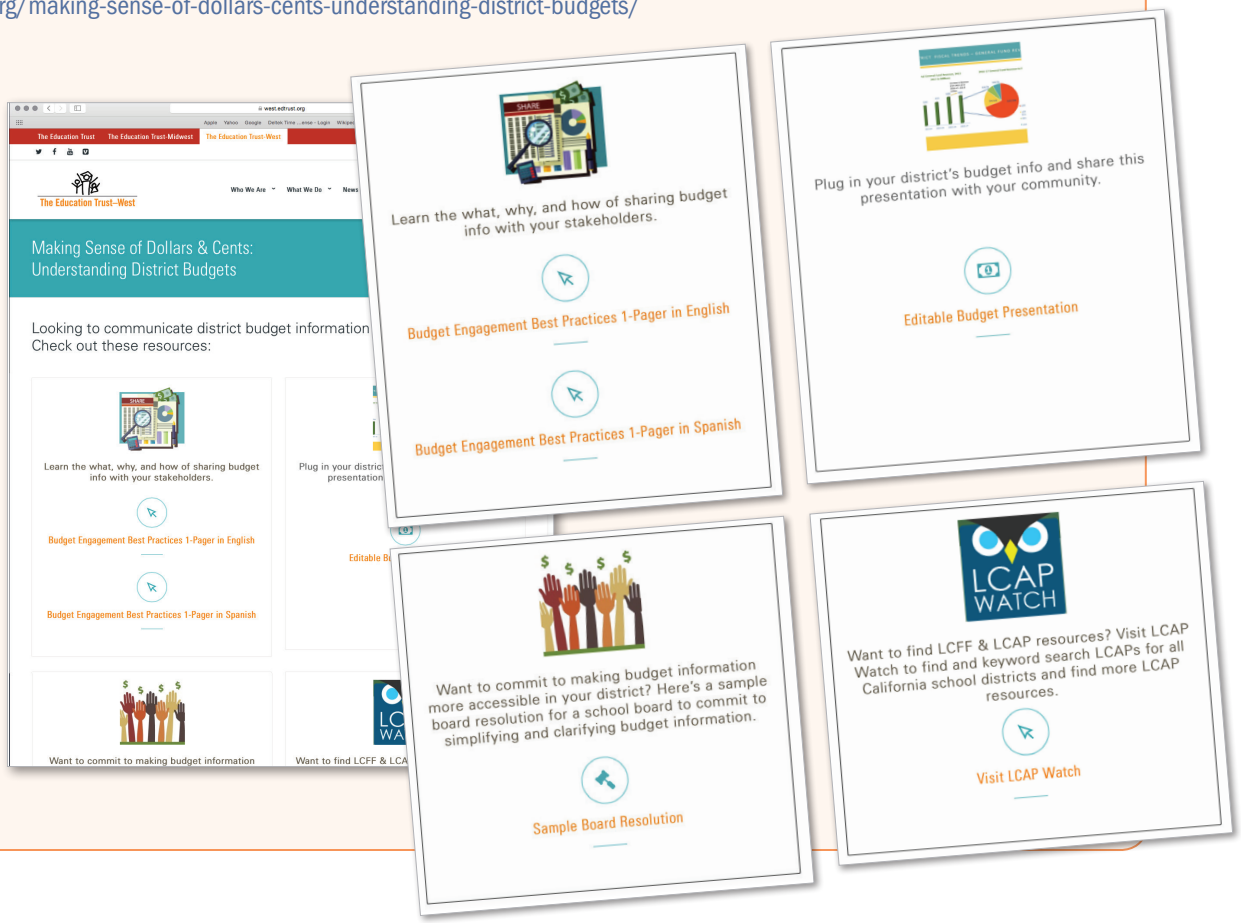
Eye-catching visuals may not facilitate understanding. The effort to grab a reader's attention can lead to splashy marketing pieces that lack or even obscure key information. Descriptions of district activities can lean too far toward success stories without emphasizing key challenges and steps to address them. Use of infographics can introduce images that draw the eye but do little to actually help the reader better understand the content. Anything a district shares should advance the user's knowledge of the district's plans for improvement.

Summaries of activities can obscure the story. Communications materials released by districts often summarize *what* the district has done. For example, many executive summaries describe community outreach by listing the number of meetings and workshops districts have held, the number of people who have participated, and the number of comments received. These publications rarely describe *why* or *how* a district is acting—in the case of community engagement, the nature of the input that districts have received or how the LCAP reflects this input. Making these connections explicit can help transform communication from a demonstration of compliance to an illustration of responsiveness.

Districts may need to develop new capacities. Communicating effectively requires skills and procedures that many districts have not traditionally had. Central offices may need to build internal capacity to perform this role effectively. They can also leverage external partners, from community members to county offices of education, to help them pursue more effective outreach.

Resources for the Field

A set of resources from the California Association of School Business Officials, Children Now, and The Education Trust–West aims to help communicate district budget information to stakeholders. Among the tools are a PowerPoint template designed to share the overall budget picture, existing financial commitments, and actions or services that make use of supplemental and concentration funding; a two-page guide that lists best practices for school and district leaders to engage with their communities; and a sample board resolution for committing to presenting clear budget information to community members. The resources are available at https://west.edtrust.org/making-sense-of-dollars-cents-understanding-district-budgets/



Can the LCAP Process Help Address Underlying Issues of Trust?

Tweaks to a template and creation of executive summaries may help communicate the contents of a district's plans. However, the current LCAP partially derives from of a lack of trust—parents and district communities have been suspicious about the adequacy of districts' actions, and this has led to wide-ranging demands for information that have overburdened the current LCAP. Fortunately, the LCFF system provides ways to improve this dynamic.

Experiences prior to and through the initial stages of LCFF implementation call for a shift in the way in which central offices and advocacy organizations interact. The relationship between the two has long been navigated through inaction or non-responsiveness from districts on one side, and protests, public comment at school board meetings, and lawsuits from advocates on the other. On the district side, developing trust may involve more deliberate outreach. Such outreach can take place not only through the LCAP development process, but through efforts like in-person briefings in which central office leaders walk through the components of a district's plans with the individuals and groups that have brought equity concerns to the table. On the advocacy organization side, engagement may mean taking steps beyond the independent review of a written document. Community leaders may need to spend time with district leaders to understand the rationale behind their decisions, the ways in which various components of a district's plans operate in concert with one another, and the ways in which those approaches can address equity issues.

An opportunity also exists to change the mindset in California regarding transparency. Sharing programmatic, spending, and outcome data is important not merely for the purposes of accountability, but for broad engagement in the process of continuous improvement. The LCAP is an opportunity to move beyond a "gotcha" assessment of legal compliance toward an authentic conversation about a district's areas of strength and opportunities for growth. The community engagement component of the LCAP planning process creates a natural avenue to air concerns, consider the constraints and competing priorities that shape district action, and collectively identify pathways to improvement. Too often in California's K–12 education system, individuals and groups divide into actors and watchdogs. **LCFF can spur more meaningful partnerships that leverage the expertise of all in service of California students.**

Conclusion

The potential for the LCFF system to empower district leaders to serve their students and communities more fully remains strong. Ongoing support from educators, advocacy groups, and policymakers speaks to the importance of both equity and local flexibility in the state's funding system. To realize LCFF's promise, stakeholders at all levels must continue to develop and refine strategies to engage parents, students, and other members of the community in communication about districts' goals and the plans for achieving those goals. The guidelines presented here can help move communication in a more productive direction.

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

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