Always Room for Improvement

The California System of Support as a Catalyst for Change

Introduction

Ensuring that all students have an opportunity to succeed in school and in life is a fundamental promise of American education. The fact that many schools and districts[1] fail to provide this opportunity continues to motivate education accountability policy at both the federal and state levels. In the waning years of No Child Left Behind—a law that used punitive accountability policies to force improvement and equity—educator and public demand began to shift the policy discourse away from blame and shame and toward a more supportive approach. At the same time, research and practical knowledge converged on the conclusion that context matters, and centrally prescribed remedies and strategies often fall short when confronted with local realities. These two emphases—the need for support and the need for local responsiveness and discretion—are cornerstones of the new district-focused accountability system emerging since the 2013 passage of California's 2013 Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

Addressing the support provisions in this law, the State Board of Education (SBE) began designing a new statewide system of support in the summer of 2017. The goal of that new system, as outlined in a November 2017 SBE memorandum, is to help districts and their schools "meet the needs of each student served, with a focus on building capacity to sustain improvement and effectively address inequities in student opportunities and outcomes" (California State Board of Education, 2017b). In December 2017, 228 districts were identified for differentiated assistance under the new system, and in that same month, the California Collaborative on District Reform met with participants from local districts, county offices of education, and state agencies to discuss how lessons from prior research, practice, and continuous improvement endeavors might help inform the design and implementation of the state's assistance efforts.

[1] The LCFF statute defines roles and responsibilities for local education agencies (LEAs), which are typically school districts, but can include entities like independent charter schools or county offices of education. For the purposes of this brief, we use the terms district and LEA interchangeably.

The California School Dashboard is an online tool displaying district and school performance on the state and local indicators included in California's school accountability system. In addition to overall student performance, the Dashboard provides data aligning to the eight state priorities under LCFF: basic services, implementation of state standards, course access, parent engagement, pupil engagement, school climate, pupil achievement, and other pupil outcomes.

Dashboard data are available for the following student subgroups:

- English learners
- Socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils
- Foster youth
- Homeless youth
- Students with disabilities
- Racial/ethnic groups

Based on the academic performance of one or more of the targeted student groups, the fall 2017 Dashboard data identified 228 districts as requiring additional support. Nearly three-quarters of the identified districts (164) were identified for the performance of students with disabilities. Another 20 percent (45) demonstrated challenges with homeless students, and 18 percent (41) with foster youth (California State Board of Education, 2017a).

This brief distills the discussion from that Collaborative meeting by outlining the principles of effective support that the meeting produced, and presenting state policymakers, county offices, districts, and support providers with suggestions on how to engage in this work productively.[2] The brief also incorporates recent feedback from the field, which was collected and summarized in a memorandum from the California Department of Education (CDE) based on the first 6 months of direct support to the newly identified districts.

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[2] For a more complete summary of the Collaborative meeting, see https://cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting34.

The brief notes areas of alignment between the Collaborative's suggestions and the June 2018 CDE memorandum while also raising additional concerns for California's education community to consider.

California is moving into its second year of using results from the Dashboard—an online tool displaying district and school performance on the state and local indicators included in California's school accountability system—to provide differentiated assistance. As this second year and begins and new leaders come into key positions in the state, we have an opportunity to approach the state system of support from a continuous improvement lens, taking the time to solidify the successes of the first year and make revisions for future implementation.

What Does Effective Support Look Like?

Prior efforts to implement a statewide system to address chronic underperformance in California have relied on what the SBE memoranda describe as "more packaged approaches" to addressing school underperformance. These attempts—including the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (1999–2000 through 2004–05), High Priority Schools Grant Program (2002–03 through 2005–06), School Assistance and Intervention Teams (2003–04 through 2009–10), and District Assistance and Invention Teams (2008–09 through 2009–10)—all provided additional funds for identified districts or schools to develop and implement action plans for improvement. A key feature of these programs was punitive consequences for schools or districts showing no growth during program participation. Consequences commonly included escalating sanctions—such as restructuring the district or withholding funding—to motivate change.

Evaluations of the previous systems found them generally ineffectual in attaining the desired student outcomes. Where small short-term benefits did materialize, they dissipated over time, particularly

What Is the New System of Support?

The statewide system of support, as currently designed, identifies three levels of assistance available to districts and schools. Level 1 encompasses an array of resources, tools, and voluntary assistance available to all districts and schools across the state. Level 2 provides differentiated assistance to districts and schools to address performance issues identified through the California School Dashboard. Level 3, intensive intervention, focuses on districts and schools with persistent performance issues. Existing guidance from the state focuses primarily on Level 2, or differentiated support.

Under the new system, County Offices of Education (COEs) and other providers are charged with tailoring Level 2 supports to the unique needs of each district, with the expectation that this work be done with—rather than to—local educators. As outlined in SBE memoranda from September and November of 2017, support should take place in four stages:

1. LEA identification through Dashboard data, voluntary participation, or a COE's rejection of a district's Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)

2. COE initial outreach to identified LEAs

3. Needs assessment and root cause analysis

4. Support from COE or other providers to LEAs and their schools to improve student outcomes

Notably, the system expands the role of the county offices of education. Research on the state's education system suggests that the envisioned new role for COEs represents a change in both mindset and responsibilities for many COEs, whose current services and capacity to provide support to districts vary widely (Collins & Kapphahn, 2017). The system designers call on COEs to work alongside districts to review and analyze data and facilitate a root cause analysis. Root cause analysis is envisioned as a systematic process that leverages locally available data to identify the underlying causes of the specific challenges districts are experiencing. While several previous systems of state intervention for low-performing districts and schools included a needs assessment, those assessments generally focused only on the symptoms—not the underlying causes. The new statewide system seeks to understand the underlying issues and tensions that contribute to underperformance. The intent is to extend beyond the strengths, weaknesses, and areas needing improvement identified through the Dashboard, and to develop options to address the root of the problems. Although the September 2017 SBE memorandum indicates that this step may include any number of stakeholders from the district—the CDE, COEs, school boards, schools, or the community—the specific roles for these various actors are not explicitly articulated.

when the additional resources introduced through the program ended. Studies of the programs consistently cited the need to enhance the role of the district in supporting school improvement and the need to increase monitoring and accountability expectations for districts as a whole (Bitter et al., 2005; Harr, Parrish, Socias, & Gubbins, 2007; McCarthy, Li, Tabernik, & Casazza, 2008; Westover et al., 2012).

Using research on the previous support systems, input from practitioners, and examinations of current continuous improvement strategies, participants at the December 2017 California Collaborative meeting suggested a set of principles to guide the development of a statewide system of support for LEAs. Effective support systems, they concluded, should do the following:

- Promote coherence at all levels
- Fit assistance to the context
- Foster the agency of local actors
- Ensure that support providers have sufficient capacity to provide high-quality assistance
- Create vehicles for ongoing improvement, both at the local level and for the support system itself

With these principles in mind, meeting participants discussed a variety of considerations for state policymakers—as well as county offices of education and other education leaders—as they endeavor to help districts improve.

Effective Systems of Support Promote Coherence at All Levels

Reflecting on both prior research and practitioner experience, meeting participants pointed to the importance of establishing coherent education systems and identified several aspects of this coherence that are particularly relevant for a state system of support. First of all, any support that a district or school receives should align with the district's goals and priorities, and (where feasible) with what they are already doing to achieve those goals. Too often, outside assistance introduces competing aims and ideas without addressing what is already in place, thus fragmenting educators' attention and efforts toward improvement.

In addition, meeting participants agreed that the statewide system of support should also align with other policies, processes, and expectations at the state level, such as the requirements for district planning and reflection in the LCAP, to avoid overburdening and confusing actors at the local level. Meeting participants recognized and appreciated the efforts of the SBE to date not only to ensure alignment among California state policies but also to reconcile differences between LCFF requirements and those of the federal government (particularly Title I). Unfortunately, feedback from districts following Year 1 of the system's implementation suggests that these efforts have so far been insufficient. COE leaders expressed a desire for "greater coherence across agencies as initiatives and support resources roll out" (California Department of Education, 2018).

Finally, simple alignment with district goals and state and federal policies will not necessarily produce consistency and clarity of action; the support must also be *internally* coherent. In other words, it should be based on a sound rationale—a vision and a theory of action—and the recommended

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improvement actions should reflect and support that rationale. Internal consistency is important both for local providers and for the state system as a whole. Participants at the Collaborative meeting expressed concern about whether the emerging statewide support system reflects this kind of coherent vision and acknowledges the wide spectrum of needs and circumstances in California districts. In particular, participants pointed to the lack of sufficient attention to Level 1 supports, which are the foundation for the entire system. Without a clear vision for these Level 1 supports, the entire system lacks explicit coherence.

The importance of coherence across levels of support cannot be overstated. California is engaged in a large-scale shift toward more challenging instruction, greater equity in resource allocation, and heightened involvement of local communities in educational decision making. The challenges for local educators are immense— even in districts with no flagged indicators on their dashboards. Yet the SBE memoranda and supports underway so far focus almost exclusively on differentiated Level 2 supports, with scant explication as to how the state is supporting all districts and schools to make necessary changes. This nearly exclusive focus on Level 2 brings two related risks. The first is the risk of incoherence, with the intensified supports of Levels 2 and 3 failing to build on and reinforce a clearly articulated Level 1 approach to supporting improvement in all local systems. The second is the risk of perpetuating the old, failure-focused conception of accountability. Both state and local actors must recognize that continuous improvement is the responsibility of everyone involved in a system—not just those who are struggling. This implies that the new system should be built to support all districts, not just to intervene with low performers. For the state system of support to be truly coherent, all districts in the state should feel

they are receiving the support they need to best serve their schools, teachers, and students.

Effective Systems of Support Fit Assistance to the Context

A panel of educators—including two superintendents, two principals, and one teacher—described their experiences as recipients of external assistance; they emphasized the importance of responsiveness to context. According to these practitioners, the most beneficial support a) addresses the specific needs that local educators have identified, b) responds to evidence about the source of identified problems, c) reflects local history and capacities, and d) monitors relevant data to examine improvement. By designing supports around local context, support providers can also help foster local coherence.

The root cause–analysis component of the new system is an effort to tailor supports to local needs. Indeed, early feedback from COE and district leaders suggests that "looking at root causes more systematically" is a valuable component of the new system (California Department of Education, 2018). To help ensure that root cause analysis appropriately identifies and addresses the areas in which districts most need to improve, meeting participants proposed that parents and community members be included in the root cause analysis, because they have unique insight into the context in which districts operate. Community engagement is, of course, integral to the strategic planning for LCFF; support providers could reinforce the connection to LCFF planning and deepen their understanding of the local context by incorporating similar engagement processes as part of the root cause analysis. In addition, meeting participants pointed out that even the best ideas for improvement may not survive a dysfunctional school board or caustic relationship between labor and management. Participants in the Collaborative meeting advocated

for root cause analyses to include an examination of these dynamics as they consider the sources of and solutions to the challenges they face.

Effective Systems of Support Build Agency Among the Local Actors

Practitioners at the Collaborative meeting agreed that districts must have the ability to make decisions for themselves that best align with their own priorities. Not only do districts know their local context best, but district buy-in is also essential for implementation. Participants praised the new system for its emphasis on support that is designed with the district rather than being imposed on the district. In contrast, however, they pointed out that by making county offices of education the point of contact between districts and the state, the new system appears to mandate that the COE serve as the lead provider of support. This architecture threatens to undermine local agency, and may constrain districts' access to a variety of external providers, some of whom may be more appropriate and effective than the COE. Districts should be able to leverage any existing relationships—as well as establish new partnerships—with organizations beyond their COE to meet their needs.

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Meeting participants also stressed that state policymakers and system designers would benefit from including district voices in any decision making. Without this input, the system is less likely to align with the types of supports the districts need and have found to be most useful. Including district voices—extending beyond the superintendent to include practitioners at all levels—is essential to ensuring that the ultimate end users of the system are heavily involved in its design. While the Year 1 feedback shared in the June 2018 CDE memorandum came primarily from district and COE leaders, and provided important information about potential system changes, it is worth noting that these

discussions took place after implementation was already in motion. Participants at the Collaborative meeting advocated for specific inclusion of district voices much earlier in the actual system design.

Support providers and practitioners alike also pointed to the importance of humility in the actual support process, calling it essential for fostering district agency and continuous improvement. COE staff and any other support providers who engage in training and other activities with districts can best present themselves as "lead learners" to help foster a culture of open reflection and growth. Meeting participants with experience implementing a continuous improvement framework especially encouraged COEs and other support providers to act humbly when co-developing plans to address areas of identified need.

Extending this line of reasoning, meeting participants noted that a key role of support providers is to elevate the expertise of those already working in the system. A great deal of the work that happens in districts is invisible—many practices and policies are not formalized or explicitly acknowledged. Much of what an outside source of support can do is to take the invisible and make it visible, so that people within the system can meaningfully intervene.

> County offices of education may be most effective if they think of themselves as one of many partners with an important role to play in the district improvement process.

Effective Systems of Support Ensure Support Providers Have Capacity to Provide High-Quality Assistance

The meeting participants included both providers and recipients of support, and many stressed the importance of quality—both through creating access to multiple sources of support as a way of deepening the pool of expertise, and in specifying the parameters of a system that seeks to ensure quality. Particularly important to providing quality

support through the new system is understanding COEs' current knowledge and skills. Traditionally, COEs have provided some combination of district oversight—including state-mandated activities such as reviewing school staff credentials and approving or denying LCAPs—and voluntary district support—such as teacher professional development or data support (Collins & Kapphahn, 2017). The proposed statewide system of support calls upon COEs to move into a more support-oriented role, including support for continuous improvement processes. This represents a substantial change in the way many COEs operate; the knowledge and skills required to perform this function may be different from those historically found within COEs. Counties may need to both develop and recruit talent to handle these new responsibilities.[3] Stakeholders who participated in CDE's feedback survey and focus groups highlighted their offices' capacity needs as a barrier to effective implementation of the new system, and particularly stressed a need for additional time, funding, and staff to address district special education needs.

Given the complex and diverse challenges districts face, individual county offices of education—regardless of staff size or depth of knowledge—will likely be unable to provide high-quality support in every domain needed by their of themselves as one of many partners with an important role to play in the district improvement process. Part of their new role could thus be to leverage multiple sources of support in service of specific district needs. For example, COEs might collaborate regionally to pool their expertise and provide services to

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[3] The California Department of Education has acknowledged the need for COE capacity building and has committed to investing $50 million to this end. This money will in part be used to fund a new collaborative regional structure for COEs intended to address capacity issues. This structure was in its nascent stages at the time of this brief's publication, with the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence recently releasing a request for applications from COEs to receive funding to serve as Geographic Lead Agencies.

address a broad range of district needs; this kind of collaboration is already taking place in some areas in the state. COEs could also broker support and relationships with other providers, including non-profits and community organizations. To carry out this broader conception of their role, it will be important for COEs to recognize and leverage their own strengths while also identifying and acknowledging their weaknesses.

Effective Systems of Support Create Vehicles for Learning to Inform Ongoing Improvement

Meeting participants advocated for a system that enables learning at the local, county, and state levels, noting that any system of improvement will itself need to improve over time. The SBE memoranda on the new system certainly embrace the language and goal of continuous improvement, and creating a culture of continuous improvement will require ongoing data collection, reflection, and refinement.

As with any new system, there are many lessons state and local actors can learn from the first year of implementation. Going forward, state leaders can adopt a learning stance that leverages these lessons to inform growth. Participants suggested building feedback loops into the system so that leaders at all levels can use their experiences to drive refinements and course corrections. Some of these mechanisms for learning are already in process. Participants from the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, for example, shared their aspiration to not only help COEs build capacity, but also share emerging best practices. The June 2018 CDE memorandum is a good starting point, as it highlights a number of successes, areas for growth, and recommendations for the system that arose during Year 1 that policymakers and system designers should consider for the coming year. It will be essential in both the coming months and the subsequent years of implementation to

approach the state system of support with the same continuous-improvement lens required of local education agencies, using the lessons gathered to modify the system in response to district needs. In addition, system designers will need to plan for future analysis to determine whether this system is actually producing improvements in the outcomes it sets out to achieve.

Conclusion

As California educators prepare for the 2018–19 school year, the time is right to examine the first months of California's new system of support and use the lessons learned to inform system revisions. Feedback from the field identified a need for greater clarity on the roles of the various stakeholders, as well as increased communication about the rationale underlying the new system (California Department of Education, 2018). While the information gathered from stakeholder feedback survey and focus groups for the June 2018 CDE memorandum provides much needed information about the system's first year of implementation, it is worth noting that the feedback came disproportionately from COE leaders. Though the CDE surveyed 57 district leaders for input, the majority of the data collection—including interviews, facilitated discussions, and an additional survey—focused on the experiences of county superintendents. Collaborative meeting participants agreed that the burden of responsibility for support should not fall exclusively on COEs, and that district voices are essential in creating a truly differentiated system of support. When planning for its second year of implementation, system designers would do well to bring more district leaders into conversations to further develop and refine the system.
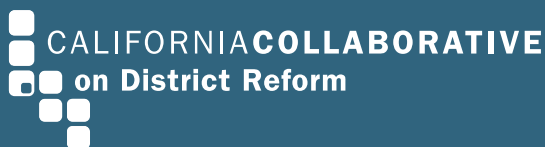
California's current period of transition presents a unique window of opportunity. Not only is the support system still new, so are many county superintendents. In fact, 43 of the 58 county superintendents are in their first or second term. New leaders operating under a new system may be more open to innovation and partnering with others,

thus shifting the vision for what locally led, context-specific support can look like in California. This is also true for the state at large: 2018 is an election year, and California will soon be selecting new executive leadership, including a new superintendent of public instruction and a governor who will appoint a new State Board of Education. With new leaders comes the renewed opportunity to realize the state's mission to provide a world-class education to all of the state's students. Now is the time to look closely at the principles that underlie the system of support and ensure that the system successfully serves the students of California.

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