User-Centered Design as a Pathway to Effective Policy

Lessons From the LCFF Test Kitchen

Policy and Practice Brief

FEBRUARY 2019

Author

Joel Knudson
American Institutes for Research

About the LCFF Test Kitchen

The LCFF Test Kitchen is a joint project of the California Collaborative on District Reform, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, Pivot Learning, and WestEd. It is designed to foster innovation in local school districts as they implement LCFF. Beginning in 2017, the effort brought together design teams from three California districts—Azusa, Elk Grove, and Oceanside Unified School Districts—to develop solutions to challenges that had been identified in the LCAP development and implementation process. For more information on the project, see https://lcfftestkitchen.org/.

Introduction

Policy development is fundamentally a process of negotiation. Legislation or other regulatory guidance often requires the support of a range of stakeholders to actually become policy. The resulting policy is therefore a compilation of interests, all partially represented in a final product that sufficiently satisfies enough key stakeholders to earn support. Too often, however, that product is incoherent, inefficient, and ill designed to meet the needs of the end users—the people or organizations charged with putting the policy into action.

The process that created California's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) is an example of this traditional approach to policy development. Developed to accompany the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the LCAP is a document template in which a district is to articulate its goals, identify the strategies designed to achieve those goals, and describe the resources supporting those strategies. In creating the LCAP template, designers responded to a range of stakeholder priorities for the document; stakeholders sought a tool for promoting strategic planning and budgeting, ensuring authentic community engagement, monitoring progress toward key outcomes, communicating about district plans with parents and other community members, and ensuring that districts receiving funds to support traditionally underserved students in fact allocated resources to support those students. The current template is the result of a process designed to satisfy everyone. But in the end, bloated district plans that stretch to hundreds of pages meet nobody's needs well (see, for example, Koppich, Humphrey, & Marsh, 2015; and Humphrey et al., 2017).

The LCFF Test Kitchen set out to address key policy design and implementation challenges in a different way—by employing an approach called user-centered design. An accompanying brief, *Improving LCFF Implementation Through User-Centered Design: Year 1 of the LCFF Test Kitchen*, describes the LCFF Test Kitchen project, the process of user-centered design, and the products that have emerged from the work. This brief addresses a broader question: To what extent can user-centered design help us address these policy issues? The pages that follow identify lessons learned over the LCFF Test Kitchen's first year, and implications for a different approach to education policy.

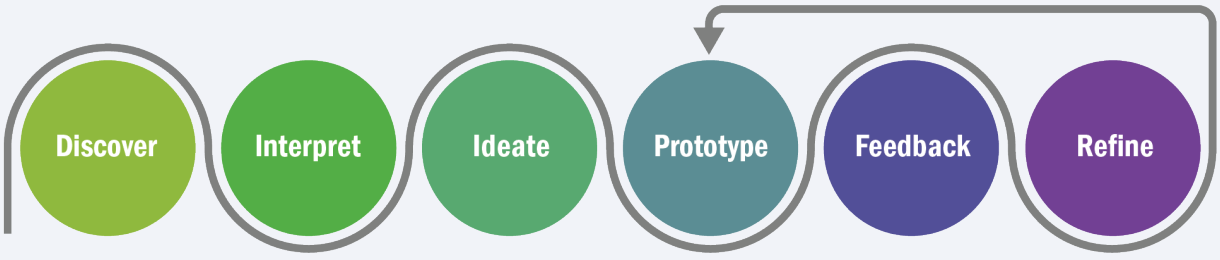
User-Centered Design Is a Viable Approach to Improving District LCFF Implementation

The LCFF Test Kitchen brought design teams from three districts together to create new approaches to their LCAP development and implementation processes. In Azusa USD, a new animated infographic aims to inform parents and other community members about how their input contributes to the LCAP's creation, and how they can become involved. Elk Grove USD has created an electronic school-based LCAP through which site leaders can capture their resource allocation decisions, communicate about them with district leaders, and navigate an internal review process. Oceanside USD has developed spreadsheets that prompt site leaders to articulate the evidence base behind their resource allocation decisions and facilitate communication between program staff and budget staff.

All three districts have developed prototypes—or solutions—that they believe will improve their district's implementation of LCFF.[1] A design team member from one district explained, "It's met a need and made us a better district in our LCAP process . . . I absolutely see [our prototype] as a great addition to the ways we're trying to constantly improve." A representative from another district described ways in which the prototype improved the quality of planning and communication with

User-Centered Design

User-centered design is an approach to problem solving that emerged from the software sector and has been increasingly employed in education to address key system challenges. The approach departs from a typical top-down model for developing and implementing policies and instead focuses on the "end user" of a particular policy. As practiced by Pivot Learning, the design process follows a series of steps—Discover, Interpret, Ideate Prototype, Feedback, and Refine—to guide design teams toward solutions that best meet the needs of the end user. For more background on user-centered design and the origins of its application to LCFF implementation, please see *Fostering Innovation: How User-Centered Design Can Help Us Get the Local Control Funding Formula Right* (Knudson, Ramanathan, Carter, & O'Day, 2017).



schools and central office administrators: "This really helped the principals take a critical look at what they were using their dollars on, what they were spending, [and] what the budget development process was." Now, "We finish each other's sentences . . . It's helped our accountants and everybody understand what the principals were trying to do." A design team member from a third district shared a similar sentiment: "It has been extremely helpful to us . . . Are we improved process-wise and outcome-wise with our LCAP? There's no question."

Beyond LCFF, User-Centered Design Is a Promising Approach to Addressing Local Education Challenges

In addition to the quality and utility of their prototypes, design team members described ways in which the approach to user-centered design can help them operate more effectively in a variety of areas. Participants explained, for example, that the process prompts decision makers to take a broader perspective and seek more innovative approaches in creating solutions to problems. "It's sad to say," one design team member shared, "those of us in public education aren't that used to being creative." The process prompted her district, she said, to think beyond typical ways of doing things. A participant from another district echoed this sentiment, saying, "The 'Ideate' process forces us to think out of the box."

Design team members also noted that the process helps avoid the impulse to rush to decisions. Pressure to respond immediately to urgent challenges in districts can lead to flawed strategies that insufficiently address the root causes of those challenges and lead to unintended consequences. With the user-centered design process, one participant explained, "We're testing. We're not just going full blown, and then things fall apart. We've realized that we need to use this type of a model for multiple things. We've had trouble when we don't do it that way and dive into implementation without testing." A design team member from another district observed that solutions from user-centered design "better fit what your needs are," saying, "It's efficient because you're not wasting your time."

Participants acknowledged that the process of user-centered design is difficult, but saw the difficulty as productive and useful. The process requires design teams to work through ambiguity and to shift course, sometimes dramatically, in response to user input and feedback. "The design process itself is challenging," one participant told us, "but I think it's meant to be. The grappling and trying to land on things and the meshing of ideas is a challenge, but it's a good one." A team member from one district even shared that the team did not yet have a complete grasp of the process itself: "We have a general understanding," the person explained, "but we don't feel that we've got it yet." Nevertheless, this participant asserted that the ability to build capacity in user-centered design was one of the biggest draws for continued participation in the LCFF Test Kitchen, because the district believes it will enhance all the organization's work.

The lessons in this brief emerged from reflections on successes, challenges, and ideas for improvement from four sources:

- Observations of design team meetings within and across the three participating districts
- Ongoing conversations with staff from Pivot Learning and WestEd who facilitated the work of the design teams in the three participating districts
- Interviews with a project team member from each of the three districts in summer 2018
- Debriefing conversations with members of two district design teams in October 2018

An Effective Design Team Should Carefully Incorporate the Right Perspectives and Dispositions

LCFF Test Kitchen participants repeatedly spoke of the value of having multiple perspectives at the table—both within and across design teams. Districts assembled their teams to include a combination of central office administrators (from both the fiscal and educational services sides) and site administrators. In some of the districts, the participation of teachers and parents further expanded the set of voices at the table. Responses from the design teams suggested that these perspectives—especially when all felt they had an equal voice in the proceedings—helped enhance the quality of conversations and decisions. Participants also valued the opportunities to interact with design teams from other districts—to leverage other teams' experiences and use the feedback to improve their prototypes.

The LCFF Test Kitchen experience suggests that the right balance of perspectives may be important to success. Teams that fail to include stakeholders outside district leadership may fail to see beyond current approaches. If all design team members are already working together on other projects, they may also struggle to maintain the work as a priority in the face of other demands. On the other hand, teams that do not include key decision makers may not be able to fully enact their designs—a good idea that does not have organizational support may never see the light of day, or may struggle to get the attention it needs for testing and refinement. Compounding these challenges, the leadership turnover that affects many urban school districts can make it difficult to sustain commitments to a project over time.

Facilitators of Design Work Must Address Challenges of Timing and Prioritization

Personal, professional, and community demands and dynamics can pull people away from consistent and fully engaged participation in a project like the LCFF Test Kitchen. As one team member explained, "We get pulled in a thousand different directions, and before you know it, we're diverting resources and things of that nature . . . We just have very few people to do a lot of stuff." A representative from another district echoed this point: "Time is a big challenge . . . When you work with multiple people in your own district, just trying to carve out that time is difficult." Challenges of competing demands and limited bandwidth are inevitable with district work; having senior leaders endorse and prioritize the work may be important for maintaining forward progress.

The scheduling challenges always present in districts are compounded when coordinating across multiple districts. For facilitators of projects like the LCFF Test Kitchen, effective leadership and partnership likely requires advanced planning and scheduling so that district partners can protect time for their shared work.

Using the Design Process for Policy Relevance Requires Clarity About Goals, the End Use, and Parameters for Design

Work that predated the LCFF Test Kitchen sought to address shortcomings of the LCAP template itself (Knudson, Ramanathan, Carter, & O'Day, 2017). As the full set of partners came together to design a project that responded to political realities and local priorities, the focus for the LCFF Test Kitchen shifted toward developing solutions within existing policy guidelines. By the end of Year 1, the design process in the three participating districts had produced prototypes that participants saw as valuable for their own local contexts. However, it had not yielded policy-actionable solutions. One participant explained, "I don't feel like we've actually gone down that route . . . The work we did was very narrow and focused on our stakeholders." Another observed, "I don't know that it's improving anything with regard to the improvement of the template . . . I don't know that that was really something in this project we have addressed."

Some of the disconnect between original policy aspirations and actual design team activity relates to the target audience for the work. The design process focuses on meeting the needs of an end user—the Discovery stage seeks to understand that user's need(s), Ideation aims to address it, and the Prototype/Feedback/Refine cycles use feedback from that user to refine an end product. For the three districts participating in the LCFF Test Kitchen, the end users were community members or district/school employees; the districts' solutions focused on local action to meet that end user's needs. Using local knowledge and expertise to inform broader policy solutions may require specific focus on a prototype that is relevant across contexts; the stages of Discovery and Ideation may need to consider the priorities and needs of policy actors in order to create a policy-relevant solution. Guideposts for the process—like the design challenge and the design parameters—should likewise be geared directly toward a policy goal.[2]

The Design Process May Be Most Useful at the Outset of Policy Design

Finally, the LCFF Test Kitchen experience to date suggests that timing plays a key role in the relevance of a user-centered design approach. From its origins in a design sprint held in November 2016 (see Knudson et al., 2017), the project originally sought to revisit the LCAP itself. Policy barriers prevented facilitators of the LCFF Test Kitchen from moving in this direction. Policymakers had no appetite for rethinking the LCAP, and even an attempt to secure waivers for participating districts to try something new failed to gain traction. Moreover, research on LCFF implementation suggests that for all its imperfections, district leaders are now accustomed to the expectations of the LCAP and may not be thrilled to navigate yet another dramatic revision to their planning and reporting requirements (Marsh & Koppich, 2018).

These experiences suggest that the design process is most valuable when a policy is first developed, and not when trying to address limitations after the fact. Participating districts have seen great promise in using the design approach to address local implementation issues. If policymakers are to leverage the strengths of user-centered design, however, it may need to happen at the very first steps of creating new guidelines and regulations. End user involvement at the outset of developing new policies, and throughout the testing process, would be critical. It would also call for a very different way of doing business among policy actors in Sacramento.

Next Steps

Moving forward, the three district design teams are continuing to refine and implement their prototypes. In doing so, they are building on the progress made in Year 1 to continue improving their local LCFF implementation efforts. Their ongoing work of testing and refining is part of the design process, and participating team members believe it will help them maximize the quality of their prototypes. The teams have also identified metrics they will use to judge the effectiveness of those prototypes and to inform further improvements.

At the same time, the LCFF Test Kitchen is pursuing a course adjustment in Year 2 to take advantage of emerging policy opportunities. New policymakers who stepped into office in January 2019 did so having called for increased transparency in district planning and resource allocation decisions. For example, new governor Gavin Newsom addressed LCFF on the campaign trail by saying, "It's all about transparency and accountability, but we have to actually follow through on what those words mean, and I think be a little bit more aggressive in advancing those principles" (Freedberg, 2017). At the same time, state leaders continue to use the language of continuous improvement in describing their goals for K–12 education; such an approach requires easy-to-understand evidence about progress that can inform a process of ongoing reflection and refinement. The LCFF Test Kitchen leadership team has therefore organized the work in Year 2 around a new design challenge:

> ***How can state policy be designed to ensure that fiscal transparency supports continuous improvement?***

This challenge directly addresses existing shortcomings in LCFF implementation related to transparency. However, it also emphasizes that transparency is not a goal for its own sake. Rather, meaningful transparency contributes to districts' ability to continually examine their progress in collaboration with stakeholders and improve their approaches over time in response to the lessons they learn.

A Year 2 kick-off meeting in October 2018 brought together a wide range of stakeholders to work through the Discover, Interpret, and Ideate phases of a new design process. These participants included members of the design teams from two LCFF Test Kitchen districts, enabling the group to leverage the insights of local educators who have spent a year building their capacity in user-centered design. Participants also included members of the broader California education community—administrators, advocates, leaders of community-based organizations, and researchers—deeply familiar with key LCFF implementation issues. Together, this set of stakeholders reviewed LCFF research and conducted empathy interviews to better understand opportunities and constraints in achieving greater transparency. They collectively

identified key takeaways and themes from this process, then brainstormed potential solutions.

The LCFF Test Kitchen team will work to translate the ideas generated in October 2018 into a set of recommendations for a new audience of policy actors—including the governor, the superintendent of public instruction, legislators, and the members of the state board of education—as they transition into their new roles in early 2019. This process will reflect an adaptation of the typical user-centered design process, as the members of the expanded design team are not necessarily in a position of authority to enact policy change. Nevertheless, the project can add value to policy decisions by building on the lessons learned from the LCFF Test Kitchen experience and the insights and experiences of key end users of the LCAP process and template, including members of local districts and their communities. For its "prototype," the group will generate a set of recommendations for what can be done to address the design challenge, the key actors who need to be involved, and a timeline over which new developments should take place.

Conclusion

The LCFF Test Kitchen employed a novel approach to addressing policy challenges that sought to address the shortcomings of traditional policy development. By leveraging the unique characteristics of user-centered design, organizers and participants in the process framed their approach not as negotiation toward a flawed but acceptable policy compromise, but as an iterative process designed to meet the needs of an end user. Early evidence from the process suggests that the project has generated improvements in local LCFF implementation for all three participating districts. However, the reach of these solutions to matters of state policy has been limited. In response to these experiences, the LCFF Test Kitchen will continue its work during the 2018–19 school year, explicitly defining the parameters of design to address a state-level policy need. The project should generate concrete ideas for improvement that new state policymakers can as they lead the state's work in K–12 education.

NOTES

1. Pivot Learning uses "prototype" to mean "a tangible representation of an idea." In their words, a prototype "takes something from your mind and turns it into something that others can see, hear, interact with, and react to" (2013, p. 8). In this brief, "prototype" refers to the product that each district developed in response to its design challenge.

2. See Knudson et al. (2017) for more information on design challenges and design parameters and their roles in user-centered design.

References

Freedberg, L. (2017, November 7). *Democratic candidates for governor declare support for California's signature education reforms* [Web log]. Retrieved from https://edsource.org/2017/democratic-candidates-for-governor-declare-support-for-californias-signature-education-reforms/

Humphrey, D., Koppich, J., Lavadenz, M., Marsh, J., O'Day, J., Plank, D., Stokes, L., & Hall, M. (2017). *Paving the way to equity and coherence? The Local Control Funding Formula in Year 3.* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education.

Knudson, J., Ramanathan, A., Carter, A., & O'Day, J. (2017). *Fostering innovation: How user-centered design can help us get the Local Control Funding Formula right.* San Mateo, CA: California Collaborative on District Reform and Pivot Learning.

Koppich, J. E., Humphrey, D. C., & Marsh, J. A. (2015). *Two years of California's Local Control Funding Formula: Time to reaffirm the grand vision.* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education.

Marsh, J. A., & Koppich, J. E., (2018). *Superintendents speak: Implementing the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education.

Pivot Learning Partners. (2013). *Pivot Learning Partners' design cycle: A tool for change.* San Francisco, CA: Author. Retrieved from http://pivotlearningpartners.org/sites/default/files/PivotChangeDesign-2013_0.pdf

The development of this brief was supported through generous contributions from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The views, findings, conclusions, and recommendations here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the viewpoints of the Foundation. The author gratefully acknowledges partners from the CCEE, Pivot Learning, WestEd, Azusa USD, Elk Grove USD, and Oceanside USD for their invaluable contributions to this project and for their feedback on early drafts of this brief.

For more information about the California Collaborative on District Reform and its work, visit www.cacollaborative.org.
For more information about the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, visit http://ccee-ca.org/index.asp.
For more information about Pivot Learning and its work, visit www.pivotlearning.org.
For more information about WestEd and its work, visit https://www.wested.org.