

## California Education Policy, Student Data, and the Quest to Improve Student Progress

### *Research Findings and Recommendations*

California does not have a statewide data system that tracks student progress through K-12 and higher education and into the workforce. As a result, educators and policymakers cannot answer critical questions about student progress, which limits their ability to make evidence-based changes to support better and more equitable opportunities for students. The good news is that the state's education systems already collect the data needed to develop a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) and California has several options for creating such a system. These are the key findings of two years of research by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights).

Recommendations based on this research (see brief 4):

- California needs an SLDS to understand and improve how students fare from K-12 schools through colleges and universities and into the workforce.
- *What is the best model for linking existing data?* The state should develop a centralized data warehouse that can create standard reports and data dashboards for key audiences.
- *Where should the data be housed?* California should create a data office within an existing state agency, or create a new state data agency, to manage an SLDS.
- *Does California need a higher education coordinating body to develop an SLDS?* Creating an effective SLDS does not require a new higher education coordinating board, although one could be beneficial.

### California's Maze of Student Data

California already collects expansive sets of data about students in its public K-12 and higher education systems—data that, collectively, have great potential to meet the information needs of state policymakers, local educators, and students and their families. But the data are maintained in systems that are not connected, are subject to different regulations, and often use different data definitions (see brief 2). This maze of data makes it difficult or impossible to access, share, and use information about student progress—whether at the state, regional, or local level.

#### ***Reports in the Series***

**[Brief 1: Gaps in Perspective: Who Should Be Responsible for Tracking Student Progress across Education Institutions?](#)**

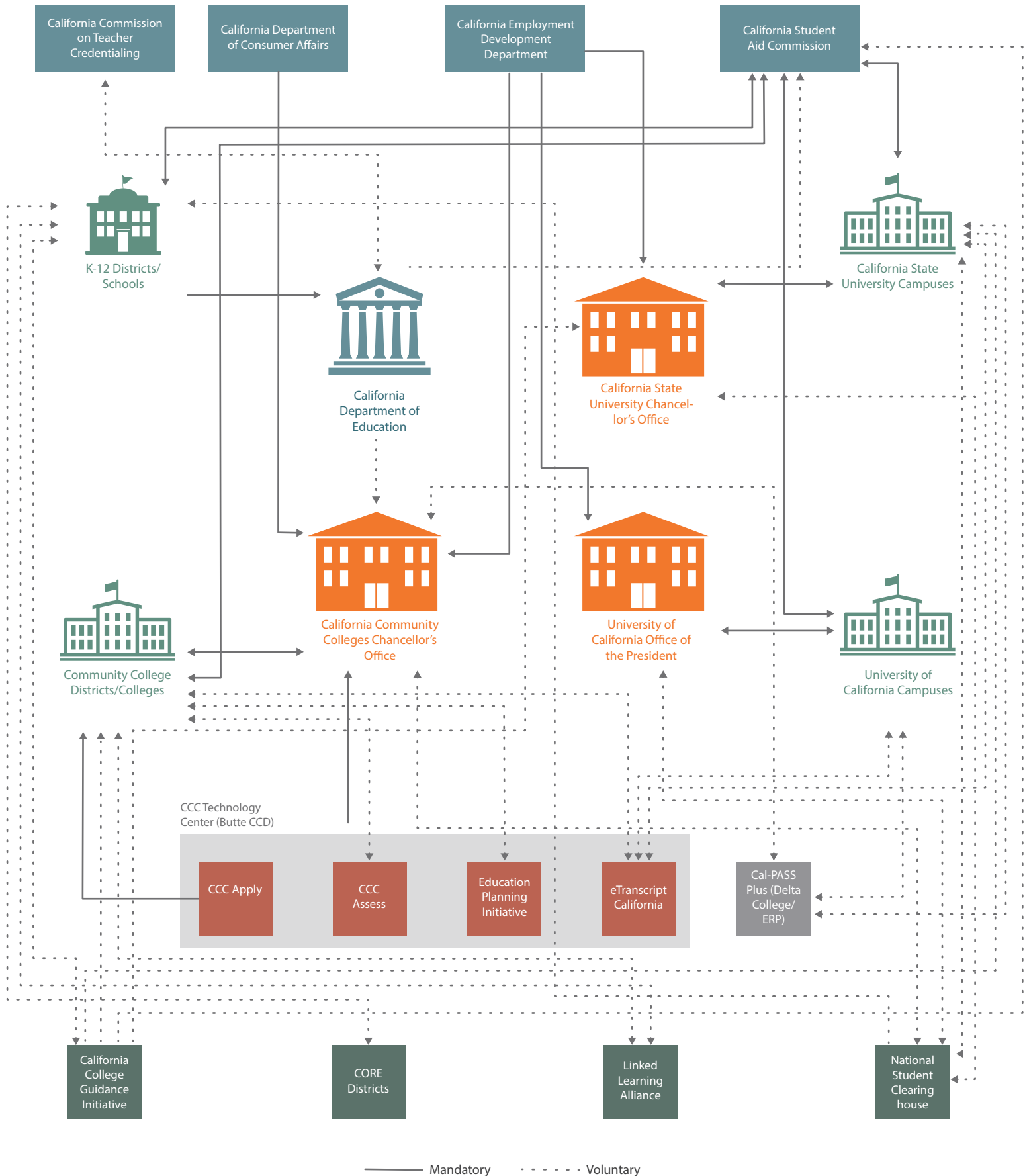
**[Brief 2: California's Maze of Student Information: Education Data Systems Leave Critical Questions Unanswered](#)**

**[Brief 3: Scaling Goodwill: The Challenges of Implementing Robust Education Data through Regional Partnerships](#)**

**[Brief 4: A Hunger for Information: California's Options to Meet its Statewide Education Data Needs](#)**

Local educators have asked for state leadership in developing a statewide data system. State policy staff are aware of these requests, but express doubt that that an SLDS would provide enough benefits to justify its implementation costs (see brief 1). They cite numerous challenges,

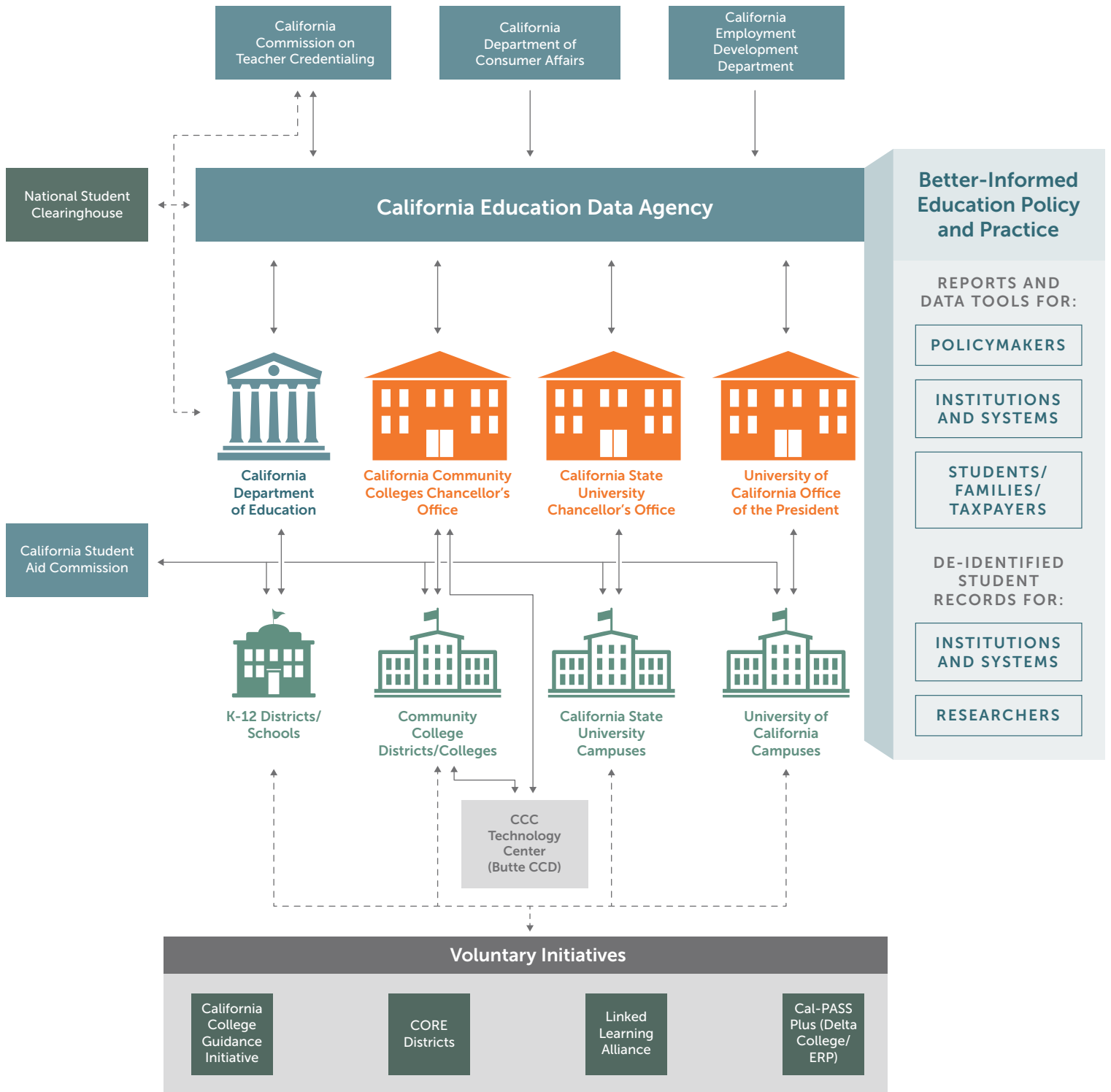
# California's Existing Student Data Framework is a "Maze" of Disconnected Systems



# A Centralized Data Warehouse Increases Efficiency and Availability of Information



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particularly the need to overcome political and cultural barriers, limited understanding among policy and system leaders about the value and purpose of cross-system student data, and the lack of any organization assigned with cross-system planning.

## Regional Data Sharing Not a Substitute for a Statewide System

Some state policy staff cited the above challenges when suggesting that data-sharing activity at the regional level is a promising alternative to the development of a statewide student data system (see brief 3). But participants in some of these regional efforts suggest that these partnerships often get stalled in the early planning stages, and face the same kinds of challenges as those cited by policy staff at the state level. Considering the large number of school districts and colleges in California, a region-by-region approach is not an efficient or effective solution for tracking the progress and outcomes of the state's mobile student population.

## Experiences in Other States

California lags behind many states that have already developed ways to use statewide data systems to provide critical information to policymakers, educators, taxpayers, and students and their families (see brief 4). Fortunately, California has a range of options for developing an SLDS; examples in other states illustrate the variety of structures and processes to link and manage student data across education systems. National experts suggest that there is no one best model; rather, the best fit for each state should align with its history, culture, and capacity. They suggest that the annual operating expenses of an SLDS may not be as costly as some assume.

## Conclusion: California Needs a Statewide Longitudinal Data System

Based on interviews and other research findings, the research team concluded that the development of an SLDS in California likely faces more significant political than technical challenges. The team developed a set of policy criteria for consideration of any new data system, including the following attributes: public good, data security, data quality, cost and time, technical feasibility, political feasibility, and sustainability. Based on these criteria, the authors recommend:

- California should develop a centralized data warehouse from which to create standard reports and data dashboards for various audiences (policymakers, schools and colleges, students/families); and
- California should create a data office within an existing state agency, or create a new state data agency, with the mission of developing and managing the data warehouse and access to the data by external researchers.

California would likely benefit from having a higher education coordinating body, but developing a data system is not contingent on resolving that issue. State policymakers and local educators need access to adequate information to improve equitable student learning, progression, and success. It is time for California to help by developing a vital tool to support their work.

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