

Enabling Conditions and Capacities for Continuous Improvement

A Framework for Measuring and Supporting Progress Towards the Goals of the Statewide System of Support

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Executive Summary

California's school accountability and support system, the Statewide System of Support (System of Support), was designed to transform California's approach to school improvement. Rather than focusing on punitive consequences for underperformance, the System of Support is designed to provide education leaders and educators with needed support to build their skills and knowledge.

Central to the state's theory of action is that building system capacity to improve will lead to increases in student achievement and will reduce disparities in outcomes. In practice, this has resulted in heightened interest and investment in continuous improvement approaches in California schools. Continuous improvement entails collective problem identification; rapid development of potential solutions; feedback mechanisms to quickly assess the effectiveness of potential solutions; and willingness to learn from failures in order to deploy successful solutions. The effective implementation of continuous improvement requires structures, practices, cultures, and capacities that are often in contrast to traditional school improvement strategies, which have prioritized scaling ideas quickly or presenting top-down mandates.

This report describes the contextual factors of organizations and the capacities of individuals that can foster the success of continuous improvement and the goals of the System of Support.

As schools, districts, counties, and state agencies embark upon the work of continuous improvement, they must also attend to the enabling conditions and capacities that undergird the success of continuous improvement efforts.

There are four general organizational conditions of improvement systems that have emerged from the research literature and the experiences of improvement professionals. These organizational conditions are: (a) **shared purpose**, (b) **culture of mutual trust**, (c) **structures and resources that foster collaborative work**, and (d) **preparation and mobilization of improvement capacities**. The capacities that equip individuals to improve include the ability to: (a) **apply continuous improvement approaches to problems**, (b) **support others to engage in continuous improvement**, (c) **provide resources and support based on local needs**, (d) **take a relational approach**, and (e) **engage others to inform the ongoing improvement of support at all levels**. These conditions and capacities lay the groundwork for continuous improvement to take hold in California's school system and advance outcomes for students.

Introduction

In December 2017, California launched a new school accountability and support system, the Statewide System of Support (System of Support). The System of Support was designed to transform California's approach to school improvement. Rather than focusing on heavy-handed consequences for underperformance, designers of the System of Support believed that in order to address persistent achievement gaps, education leaders and educators needed *support* to continue to build their skills and knowledge. In other words, the System of Support was designed based on the premise that prior accountability efforts were unsuccessful, at least in part, because they ignored the need to *build local capacity to improve*. Therefore, the state's goal for the System of Support is:

To help local educational agencies (LEAs) and their schools meet the needs of each student they serve, with a focus on building local capacity to sustain improvement and to effectively address disparities in opportunities and outcomes. (California Department of Education, n.d.-a, para. 1).

Central to the state's theory of action is that building system capacity to improve will lead to improved student achievement and will reduce disparities in outcomes. As a result, there has been increased interest and investment in continuous improvement approaches in California schools.

"Continuous Improvement" has become a commonplace term within education policy circles in California and across the nation. As an approach to identifying and making progress towards complex goals of increasing student achievement, the strategy relies on a relatively straightforward logic and process: collective problem identification; rapid development of potential solutions; feedback mechanisms to assess quickly the effectiveness of potential solutions; and the ability to learn from failures in order to deploy successful solutions. Seemingly simple in concept, effective implementation of continuous improvement requires structures, practices, and cultures that are often in contrast to traditional improvement strategies, which have prioritized scaling ideas quickly or presenting top-down mandates.

A few years into implementation of the System of Support, there is a small but growing research and practice literature highlighting the work of schools and districts that have effectively implemented continuous improvement strategies. Researchers studying California's early implementation of continuous improvement find that "when it's well understood and appropriately applied, a continuous improvement approach can improve education quality" (Grunow & Hough, 2018, p. 3). Some of the bright spots, for example, include increases in academic success, specific gains for traditionally underserved student subgroups, higher graduation rates, and increased use of data and evidence to drive change (Grunow & Hough, 2018).

Although there have been several demonstrations of the viability of continuous improvement in schools in California (Gallagher & Cottingham, 2019; Krausen, Caparas, Mattson, 2019), as can be expected, not all efforts to apply continuous improvement achieve their goals. Even in the corporate context, where continuous improvement strategies have been in use for decades, research indicates that over 70 percent of improvement efforts fail (Chakravorty, 2010). A study of improvement projects in healthcare facilities showed that half of the process improvement projects failed to meet their stated goals, and of those that were deemed successful, only half sustained their improvements after 1 year (Ziaee & Bologna, 2015).

Such variation in outcomes may lead to skepticism about the state's focus on continuous improvement as the foundation of its System of Support. Alternatively, the explanation for the variation in success may lie not in the methods themselves but in the *contextual* factors of the organizations that foster or attenuate the success of continuous improvement. This might include an incomplete understanding or inadequate investment in the capacity of individuals to engage in continuous improvement, which requires a specific set of skills, knowledge, and mindsets. According to the estimation of improvement pioneer W. E. Deming (2018), 94 percent of the problems and opportunities for improvement belong to the system (p. 248), and contextual factors are part of the system. One California district superintendent reflected:

I think there's a hidden assumption around some of the continuous improvement frameworks that you have some of these systems in place and then here's how to improve those systems, right? What if you don't have any of those systems in place? Then, the first step is building those systems. (Hough et al., 2017, p. 13)

Objectives

The shift to continuous improvement is about introducing new ways of organizing and engaging in work. It takes both organizational conditions and a set of skills and knowledge to advance and sustain improvement efforts at different levels of the system—state, county, district, and school. Yet, despite the core premise of the System of Support—that all improvement assistance should build the capacity of Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to design and implement programs responsive to student needs—what is meant by “capacity” has been left largely unspecified, as have the conditions that must be in place for those capacities to be effective. Moreover, state leaders of the System of Support have not clearly articulated how improvement capacities will be developed, and what specific capacities are needed for leaders tasked with designing and providing support in districts, in county offices of education (COEs), and in state agencies such as the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), and the State Board of Education (SBE). In particular, COEs are central actors in the System of Support in that they are charged with providing differentiated assistance to eligible LEAs. However, it is widely recognized that COE capacity to guide improvement efforts is uneven across counties, with some county offices

being very capable of supporting their identified districts while others are themselves in need of additional improvement support (Humphrey & O'Day, 2019).

In an effort to more fully articulate the System of Support's components and to guide the development of an improvement framework for assessing whether the design is working, PACE and WestEd conducted a study of the organizational conditions and individual capacities necessary to enact continuous improvement and achieve the goals of the System of Support.

This latest exploration of how to strengthen continuous improvement efforts in California included development of a framework that outlines the organizational conditions necessary to support improvement efforts; the primary roles and functions of system leaders at each level of the System of Support; and the capacities needed at the school, district, county, and state levels to successfully embed continuous improvement in California schools.

Methods

Development of the conditions and capacities framework was guided by a series of interviews with state, county, district, and school leaders over the course of 2 years. Initially, the WestEd and PACE study teams began work separately, with the WestEd team focused on the development of a capacity-building framework and the PACE team working to outline the foundational conditions necessary for continuous improvement. Responding to requests for greater definition around the core capacities necessary to meet the goals of the System of Support, a team at WestEd began working with state, county, and district leaders to outline key skills and knowledge. The first capacity framework was codeveloped in fall 2018 and shared with a broad group of education leaders from all levels of the system. These leaders reviewed the roles identified for leaders at the state, county, and district levels, as well as the core capacities needed to advance improvement systemwide in the state. Specifically, leaders were asked to rank the core capacities in order of importance and to identify any capacities that were missing or that needed greater clarification. This framework was then used to develop a set of survey items¹—administered to state, county, and district leaders—geared towards measuring progress and informing areas for improvement. The resulting capacity measures were intended to be used as important leading indicators of the ability of leaders and staff across the system to effect improvement, and as a complement to summative student outcome measures appearing on the California School Dashboard.

It became increasingly clear that the enabling organizational conditions and the key capacities (skills and knowledge) work together and are dependent on each other. For example, if a district leader has the ability to analyze and monitor data, this ability cannot have an impact

¹ Survey items were developed by the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd staff with input from the System of Support Coordination Team, Association of California Superintendents and Administrators (ACSA), and the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA).

if the district does not have an effective data infrastructure in place. Similarly, having a sophisticated data infrastructure without leaders who know how to use the data system for improvement will not advance improvement goals. The interdependence between organizational conditions and individual capacities for the advancement of improvement efforts in the state led to the development of the full framework.

Another round of interviews was conducted with state, county, and district leaders between November 2019 and early 2020. These interviews included a review of the framework and discussions about how it might more closely reflect the roles and capacities necessary at each level of the system. The organizational conditions component of the framework was vetted at a research conference hosted by PACE in fall 2019 focused on the System of Support. The full framework, including both the organizational conditions and the capacity framework, was shared as part of a panel presentation for an audience of over 150 participants at PACE's annual research conference in February 2020.

Understanding California's Ecosystem of Continuous Improvement

Spreading the work of continuous improvement across all levels of California's education system to affect teaching and learning in the classroom is a complex and ambitious endeavor. Retooling the entire system (i.e., state, county, district, school) acknowledges that continuous improvement requires focus and coherence across all levels. In addition, it means that all of the different organizational contexts, histories, and relationships within and between the levels can either help or detract from meaningful, sustainable improvement. Outlining the specific functions and responsibilities of each level of the system provides a frame for understanding where additional support might be needed when improvement is not occurring. For example, if a school district that is eligible for differentiated assistance is not improving outcomes for students, it may indicate a need to improve the organizational conditions and individual capacities within the district and/or it may indicate that the support provided by the COE is insufficient and capacity should be strengthened at the county level. Similarly, if there is a lack of clarity around the vision and theory of action for the System of Support, this indicates the need to reinforce organizational conditions and improvement capacities at the state level.

The following section outlines the primary function or responsibility of education leaders at each level of the system for enacting continuous improvement through the System of Support. Roles were refined based on multiple rounds of input from system leaders. However, despite general consensus on the roles outlined in the capacity framework, they will likely require continued clarification as the System of Support evolves. The descriptions below are intended to differentiate clearly the focus of the improvement work of system leaders at each level. The list focuses solely on the primary role of system leaders in achieving the goals of the System of Support and is not intended to be an exhaustive list of the many other important aspects

of system leaders' daily work. Though other actors play pivotal roles in fostering continuous improvement (including unions, school boards, and advocacy groups), the following agencies and organizations are limited to those that have formal roles in the System of Support.

State (California Department of Education, State Board of Education, and California Collaborative for Educational Excellence)

The state agencies named above are charged primarily with creating effective policy levers to enable successful implementation of the Statewide System of Support, including supporting lead agencies and disseminating information about the state's approach to accountability and improvement. The CDE also provides differentiated assistance to eligible COEs. The focus of the state's work in the System of Support is to:

- Guide ongoing improvements to the System of Support based on the needs identified through the Dashboard, feedback from system leaders, and other data sources.
- Align state funding and policies to support systemwide improvement.
- Connect lead agencies, COEs, and LEAs to resources.
- Clarify and disseminate information about the System of Support and its components to increase understanding and buy-in.
- Provide capacity-building, coordination, and collaboration support for lead agencies.

County Office of Education (Including Geographic Lead Agencies)

The COE's primary function in the System of Support is to provide support to school districts. Those that serve as Geographic Leads also serve as resource providers (in the form of technical assistance and content expertise), capacity builders, and liaisons so that COEs can learn from each other. The focus of the work of COEs in the System of Support is to:

- Provide universal support (i.e., Level 1) to all LEAs and county-run schools in the county.
- Provide differentiated assistance (i.e., Level 2 support) to LEAs in the county.

The focus of the work of Geographic Lead Agencies (Geo Leads) in the System of Support is to:

- Build the capacity of county offices within their geographic area to provide effective improvement support to their respective districts.
- Connect counties to each other, to external assistance providers, and to other leads that can support them and the districts they serve.
- Communicate the needs of LEAs and COEs back to state agencies.

School Districts

School districts are considered the unit of change in the System of Support. Their focus is both on implementing system improvements in the district office and on supporting school sites to improve outcomes for students. In the System of Support, districts aim to: (a) support schools to improve student outcomes; (b) engage in sustainable district-level improvement work; (c) use the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) to guide improvement planning; and (d) facilitate regular, meaningful engagement opportunities with schools, families, and community stakeholders as part of all phases of the improvement process.

Schools

Schools are most directly responsible for student success, and students are intended to be the ultimate beneficiaries of the state's improvement infrastructure. The focus of schools in the System of Support is to: (a) meet the learning needs of every student; (b) address disparities in learning opportunities and outcomes; and (c) sustain improvement efforts.

Enabling Conditions for Continuous Improvement

There are four general organizational conditions of improvement systems that have emerged from the research literature and the experiences of improvement professionals. These organizational conditions are: (a) **shared purpose**, (b) **culture of mutual trust**, (c) **structures and resources that foster collaborative work**, and (d) **preparation and mobilization of improvement capacities**.

The enabling organizational conditions framework draws from literature on organizational change across disciplines that has examined the conditions and context of successful improvement organizations. These enabling conditions apply to each level of the system: schools, districts, counties, and state organizations. This report highlights examples from the school level and also identifies areas of potential misalignment or areas where further guidance across the full system could be beneficial. **The full framework, with examples for each level of the system, is included in Appendix A.**

Shared Purpose

A common purpose reflects the organization's fundamental reason for existence (Adler & Heckscher, 2018). Captured by the notion of "start with why" (Sinek, 2009), shared purpose within an organization provides focus and direction for improvement efforts. W. E. Deming (2000) believed that developing and maintaining a constancy of purpose was the most important step towards achieving quality and organizational improvement. Indeed, noteworthy scientific

breakthroughs, sweeping social movements, and rapidly growing organizations are often the result of a clear, shared unifying purpose (Ismail, 2014). Purpose that propels motivation and transformation does not describe what is possible today but rather depicts a different future that is worth aspiring towards. **Key questions to guide an organization’s development of a shared purpose include: (a) Why does our organization exist, (b) how will we be successful, and (c) how will we know that we have succeeded?**

Similarly, Fullan and Quinn (2015) write about coherence—what is at work in the *minds* and *actions* of people individually and collectively—as a central “driver” of change. Key to coherence is a focusing direction. School staff and leaders need to have a shared purpose that guides their priorities and actions as well as a shared sense of responsibility for the outcomes of their work. A shared purpose among school staff should reflect the unique characteristics and circumstances of the school community. In addition, shared purpose and responsibility should:

- **Be student-centered.** Reflect a whole-child understanding of teaching and learning and let student needs drive improvement.
- **Prioritize equity.** Especially significant within California’s improvement context, equity is foundational to accountability and improvement. Equity indicators and outcomes are explicitly named as part of California’s improvement context.² Schools and improvement actors must be aware of and work intentionally towards disrupting bias in all of their interactions with students, families, and colleagues, as well as scrutinize the assumptions that they use in decision-making for the presence of bias. Teachers, staff, and administrators must be committed to positively affecting all students’ outcomes—regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, background, or disability classification. It is critical to move equity conversations from only talking about equity values to implementing comprehensive and actionable strategies that increase equity in inputs and outcomes.
- **Be codeveloped with differentiated roles.** Individuals within the system should clearly understand their specific contribution to the purpose and goals of the organization as well as how the parts work together. Engaging school and community stakeholders—including students, teachers, and families—as part of defining the purpose is foundational to their continued involvement in ongoing continuous improvement processes. All system actors share responsibility for improving student outcomes.

² See the main CDE site for the System of Support at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp> as well as the CCEE’s about page at <https://ccee-ca.org/system-of-support/about-the-system>

- **Reflect a sense of urgency.** Administrators and staff should see the need for change and understand that the status quo is no longer acceptable. According to research on organizational change, over 50 percent of change efforts fail due to the lack of a sufficient sense of urgency for change (Kotter, 2012).
- **Maintain constancy.** School administrators and leaders should be focused on shared purpose over an extended period of time and should strategically limit the number of initiatives at the school. The prioritization and monitoring of no more than six initiatives in a school at a time is related to improvements in students' learning (Reeves, 2015).

California's context of local control complicates notions of shared purpose and responsibility. At the school level, the purpose (i.e., mission and vision statements) is supposed to be an overarching organizational goal for continuous improvement efforts. However, defining an organizational purpose—say, at the school level—may sometimes be unintentionally thwarted or complicated by district, county, or state purposes that prioritize a different set of improvement objectives. This is particularly challenging in consideration of the state's eight priorities;³ schools (and districts) are caught between delivering on all priorities, addressing annual Dashboard results, being responsive to their community's needs, and purposefully limiting the number of initiatives that staff must attend to. Similarly, some districts might develop a purpose at the aggregate level that does not adequately reflect the needs of its diverse (and sometimes demographically, geographically, and socioeconomically disparate) schools.

David and Talbert (2012) write about how Sanger Unified School District balanced tight and loose control by defining clear parameters around when and how schools have discretion over their priorities:

Referred to as "tight-loose," leaders are clear about their "non-negotiables" which translate into requirements for schools (the what). At the same time, schools are clear about the flexibility each has to do it "their way" (the how). As evidence accumulated about effective school practices on any one of their four core initiatives, the district tightened requirements with clearer guidelines for practice and protocols for assessing progress. (p. 16)

Culture of Mutual Trust

Reflecting on results and plans, trying new ideas, and collecting data on new approaches are all strategies that can lead to improvement, but a realistic improvement journey also includes

³ The CDE's eight priority areas for school districts include: basic services, implementation of state standards, course access, student achievement, other student outcomes, student engagement, parent involvement, and school climate (see California Department of Education, n.d.-b).

failure along the way. Accordingly, improvement work requires trusting that change efforts will not be penalized—even when they fall short of their intended goals. As one district superintendent said: “The system has to be created so that the organization feels safe enough to actually try something different” (Hough et al., 2017, p. 8). Mutual trust in school is what “fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social-psychological, that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect productivity improvements” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 116). It is the connective tissue that binds individuals together as they work to advance a common purpose.

Bryk and Schneider, in their studies of over 400 public schools in Chicago, refer to the foundational importance of “relational trust”—where teachers, students, parents, and leaders understand their obligations and also hold expectations about the contributions of others:

An interrelated set of mutual dependencies are embedded within the social exchanges in any school community. Regardless of how much formal power any given role has in a school community, all participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts. (2003, Sect. 2, Para. 2)

As in any other relationship, such trust must be cultivated and constantly renewed, especially in the context of work that is highly interdependent and historically fraught with uncertainty and stress.

Similarly, Amy Edmonson (2019) studies what she calls “psychological safety” in workplaces—that is, the extent to which individuals trust their peers and believe that inquiry and vulnerable conversations are foundational to their professional environment. This notion is especially significant for low-performing schools and districts that experienced defensiveness, anxiety, and self-protection under previous accountability regimes. In a comprehensive analysis of the factors that make a team successful at Google, researchers sought to understand the components of an effective team. They ran statistical models on hundreds of variables, including: education level, similarities in hobbies, personality types, degree of overlap in social networks, and gender balance. These researchers discovered that what made a team effective was less about who was on the team and more about the way the team worked together. Psychological safety was found to be the factor that best predicted team effectiveness (Duhigg, 2016).

Organizations that prioritize and develop high psychological safety are able to support dynamic collaboration and “teaming,” creating settings in which colleagues are able to work together without interpersonal anxiety or fear. Edmonson writes:

They feel willing and able to take inherent interpersonal risks of candor. They fear holding back their full participation more than they fear sharing a potentially

sensitive, threatening, or wrong idea. The fearless organization is one in which interpersonal fear is minimized so that team and organizational performance can be maximized in a knowledge intensive world. (2019, p. xv)

Particularly relevant to continuous improvement work, a culture of mutual trust can allow people to focus on achieving shared goals—including supporting and strengthening individual learning behaviors and collective performance—instead of focusing on self-protection. Research shows that psychological safety shapes an employee’s propensity to engage in learning behaviors such as information sharing, asking for help, and experimenting.

To foster a culture of trust, leaders must develop and maintain an emphasis on support and collaboration—as opposed to mandate and compliance. Organizational leaders are able to earn and maintain the trust of their colleagues by explicitly and consistently modeling learning and inquiry in their own work, in addition to concretely supporting the collaborative efforts of staff and partners. Leaders must also demonstrate that they trust and respect the decisions and expertise of staff and teachers by minimizing reliance on mandates and compliance for improvement, and by emphasizing support and collaboration. In addition, members of the school community believe in their collective ability to make a difference for students—groups with greater collective efficacy demonstrate greater improvement in student outcomes (Bandura, 1993; Donohoo et al., 2018; Goddard et al., 2004). Collective efficacy strengthens and sustains a community’s capacity for improvement, and is developed over time with evidence of impact, including “small wins.”

School reform successes and failures often depend on relationships in addition to knowledge and skills (Fullan, 2011). While professional development efforts might be focused on specific content areas to build staff knowledge and skills, the individual beliefs and relational aspect of how those changes are enacted is often overlooked—or presumed to emerge naturally over time. In a trusting, safe, and supportive school and district environment that engages in continuous improvement:

- **School staff, leaders, families, and students have relationships characterized by relational trust.** The interpersonal dynamics and exchanges among members of the school community demonstrate relational trust. Critical attributes that foster relational trust include respect, personal regard for others, competence, and integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).
- **School staff, leaders, families, and students feel psychologically safe.** They are able to engage in learning behaviors—such as admitting to lack of knowledge, making mistakes, expressing dissenting perspectives, asking for help, or taking risks—without fear of punishment or interpersonal or social threat (Edmonson, 2019).

- **School staff and leaders engage in continuous improvement in *their own work*.** School staff and leaders demonstrate vulnerability, seek feedback, and apply disciplined inquiry methods to engage in the testing of ideas and learning from failures. This is especially important for counties and state organizations that need to “walk the talk” of the approach they promote and expect from districts and schools.
- **School staff and leaders prioritize support.** Support is prioritized for teachers, students, and the community; school staff and leaders are explicit about investing in the relationships and resources that are needed to succeed.
- **School staff and leaders believe in their collective ability to affect all students’ outcomes together.** This occurs regardless of student race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, background, or disability classification.

The state’s shift from a culture of compliance to one of support is easier said than done. To change cultures and mindsets, systems leaders (especially those who have traditionally held the most decision-making power and authority) must recognize where trust has been broken or eroded. For example, there is preliminary evidence that some COEs are intentionally working on strengthening trust with their districts by implementing and modeling continuous improvement processes in their own work (Manansala & Cottingham, 2019).

However, the broader theory of action for COEs in supporting district improvement efforts remains unclear. The state must better articulate the assumptions behind the processes or mechanisms across the full System of Support, including what data is needed, who analyzes it, how improvement priorities are determined, and how feedback will be integrated into decision-making and governance structures, especially with regards to funding and accountability.⁴ All of these assumptions affect the ability of leaders and practitioners to build and strengthen the trust necessary for improvement work.

Structures and Resources That Foster Collaborative Work

Historically, the work of teaching has been isolated work. Sociologist Dan Lortie (1975) described schools as organizational “egg crates” in which each teacher conducts their work alone within the confines of the classroom, focused on their own students with limited interaction with colleagues. Teacher autonomy has traditionally rested on freedom from scrutiny and the largely unexamined right to exercise personal preference, with teachers acknowledging and tolerating the individual preferences or styles of others (Little, 1990). It is well established in research, however, that teacher collaboration in joint work reaps benefits for student learning, teacher practice, and

⁴ In 2019, the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd conducted a formal feedback plan for the CDE and SBE in the first 2 years of the System of Support to gather data on early implementation. The state has now hired an evaluation firm to carry out this work.

school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Ronfeldt et al., 2015). School reform is replete with strategies attempting to dismantle this traditional approach to isolated teaching, yet for many schools and districts, ideas of collaboration and teaming are often at odds with the dominant cultures of order and control. School improvement work is not an individual task but depends on the ability of school staff—leaders, educators, and support staff—to work together to identify challenges and to try and test different solutions. However, traditional school structures offer limited opportunities for teachers to partner substantively with others outside of their classrooms, and instead often rely on “one-shot” workshops (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). That, in turn, limits continuous improvement practices and opportunities to build a culture of mutual trust, support, and collaborative learning.

Schools and districts that invest in a continuous improvement approach have adequate and sustainable resources to support the ongoing work of improvement and are intentional about creating and maintaining integrated structures and practices that facilitate and encourage collaboration and collective learning. This includes:

- **Protected time and norms for collaboration.** There is protected time and space for teacher and staff collaboration built into the master schedule so that teachers are able to work together. Similarly, there are clear and formal working norms around how teachers and staff effectively use their collaboration times (e.g., grade-level teams, coordination of services teams, cycles of inquiry).
- **Sufficient and sustainable improvement resources.** This encompasses coaching and student support personnel (including substitutes), training, funding, and materials that guide improvement conversations and processes.
- **Breaking down silos.** Working deliberately across departments and disciplines is not the same as just being together in the same meeting. Instead, leaders must have explicit rationale about who meets when and what the focus is; follow well-designed processes and protocols to facilitate important and productive interactions; and include those who are most often left out (e.g., students and families).
- **Data infrastructure.** A data infrastructure is invaluable to continuous improvement efforts and must be heavily supported. This includes staffing and resources to collect, manage, and facilitate the use of data as part of continuous improvement processes.
- **Engagement practices.** There is a demonstrated commitment to engage, meaningfully and regularly, a wide range of stakeholders in improvement work, including teachers, students, families, and community members. These stakeholders must be recognized as being invaluable to learning and as having shared goals of improving student outcomes.

Amid the continuing budget shortfalls and concerns around teacher and administrator retention (Darling Hammond et al., 2018; Grissom & Sutchter, 2018), California must be realistic about what it takes to support a sustainable nested System of Support. Improvement work across the ecosystem, particularly at the district and county levels, generally mirrors the same enabling conditions at the school level in terms of protected time, process, and resources. However, it is important to recognize that at the school level, conditions are highly dependent on the surrounding funding and accountability context (i.e., district, county, and state resources, policies, and priorities). For example, district collective bargaining agreements can strengthen school-level collaboration efforts, specifically in terms of ensuring that there is protected time to engage in professional learning and improvement activities.

For the System of Support to be most effective, structures that foster collaborative work must include clear and consistent expectations, timing, and resources to support specific improvement processes not only at the district and school levels but also in the ways that county and state actors work together. For instance, most COEs were traditionally organized to focus on compliance monitoring activities on behalf of the state. COEs are expected to continue in this role but are now also called on to build the capacity of the districts they support to continuously improve, which requires a completely different set of structures, skills, knowledge, relationships, and processes than those traditionally held in COEs (Humphrey & O’Day, 2019; Manansala & Cottingham, 2019).

Similarly, the state’s role—policy, guidance, tools, and funding—is shifting and, as the work evolves, there is a better understanding of the refinements that must be in place to help schools, districts, and counties address state priorities (Henig et al., 2018). For instance, the tensions discussed above around defining a “shared purpose” have process and resource implications; the state’s priorities and multiple initiatives might unintentionally hinder focused and coherent improvement efforts. In addition, aside from piecemeal funding from the legislature, there has yet to be a clearly designated, sufficient, and sustainable revenue stream to support the comprehensive improvement efforts that are supposed to take place at the school, district, county, and state levels. Revenue streams must also include ongoing investments in strengthening the state’s data infrastructure to be user-friendly for families and communities as well as agile and responsive to the improvement needs of practitioners and decision makers.

Preparation and Mobilization of Improvement Capacities

To support continuous improvement in schools across the state, organizations must not only develop a shared purpose, a culture of trust, and structures to foster collaborative work but also make investments in developing the skills and knowledge necessary in individuals within organizations to engage in continuous improvement. There are several different types of continuous improvement methodologies, each with their own set of tools, principles, and social practices, including: Design-Based Implementation Research; Deliverology; Implementation

Science; Improvement Science; Lean; Positive Deviance; and Six Sigma; among others. There are relevant differences among these methodologies, most notably (a) who the problem solver is, (b) the kinds of problems the methodologies are designed to solve, and (c) the specific tool sets they employ. Regardless of the methodology selected, experts agree that it is important for an organization to select and use a common methodology to promote discipline within their continuous improvement efforts. Having a common improvement methodology fosters a common language and enables the building of expertise with the practical tools of improvement over time (Hough et al., 2017). A common continuous improvement methodology equips an organization with a new way of addressing problems. To enable improvement work, leaders and staff must be equipped for this new way of working. Primarily, they need to have identified:

- **The set of knowledge and skills for improvement.** This includes, for instance, having a basic knowledge of a particular improvement methodology; the ability to analyze data and identify areas for improvement; strategies to identify and address root causes of problems; content knowledge to support instruction; and sufficient information about students and families to tailor instruction and support. These are discussed in more detail in the next section on core improvement capacities that are foundational to the System of Support.
- **Which staff needs which skills.** While there are some basics of improvement methodology around purposeful action, assessment, and adjustment, as well as a reliance on data with which all staff could benefit, improvement work will not uniformly engage all staff or stakeholders. Related to developing a culture of and structures to support collaborative learning, it is important to differentiate roles and skills, and to create the learning environments and supports for those for whom more specialized improvement expertise is needed. The section that follows identifies which capacities are needed at different levels of the System of Support, but these should be further differentiated by role at each level.
- **A consistent and intentional professional learning strategy.** Instead of relying on rote professional learning days or piecemeal presentations from “experts,” leaders need to have a thoughtful and sustainably resourced adult learning strategy that engages teachers and staff, prioritizes relationships, demonstrates and models evidence-based decision-making, and embeds the learning within professional roles.

What, specifically, are the skills, knowledge, and abilities that are necessary for individuals to develop within an organization for improvement? And what capacities and roles are necessary to advance continuous improvement in different levels of the school system in California? The next section focuses on detailing a core capacities framework for continuous improvement that identifies the roles and responsibilities necessary at each level of the System of Support to meet its goals.

Core Capacities for Continuous Improvement

Education leaders across California are increasingly investing time and professional development resources in continuous improvement methods, yet at the same time, system leaders have also acknowledged considerable gaps in the ability of system actors to engage in or coach others to engage in a continuous improvement approach, especially to close equity gaps (Hough et al., 2017; Valdez et al., 2020).

From the outset, the System of Support Planning Team—the body charged with organizing early implementation of the system—recognized the importance of defining the core capacities for continuous improvement and engaged staff from the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd to begin this work. Specifically, system leaders believed that defining the individual roles, responsibilities, and capacities at the state, county, and district level would allow education leaders to understand better how to allocate resources (e.g., funding, technical assistance) to different levels of the system and where to focus and prioritize capacity-building efforts. For example, many county leaders received training in improvement science during the first year of implementation of the System of Support. Many of those county leaders found themselves serving as improvement coaches for school districts. Therefore, it seemed critical to understand the degree to which improvement coaching capacity, specifically, had been built in the system, and where greater capacity-building was necessary in order to successfully carry out this role.

Defining core capacities is also a way to measure progress in the System of Support. By defining capacities throughout the system, leaders can use corresponding capacity indicators to measure progress over time. In addition, capacity measures may serve as important intermediary measures while waiting to see if the System of Support has a meaningful effect on student and school-level outcomes, as shown on the Dashboard.

Overview of Core Capacities for Continuous Improvement

The capacity framework (presented for each level in Appendices A–D) builds on the assumptions and goals of the System of Support—building local capacity and improving student outcomes—and identifies the specific roles and responsibilities needed to meet those goals at each level of this system, as described earlier. For each of these roles, there are specific skills and knowledge (i.e., capacities) that are required of staff in county offices, for instance, to successfully fulfill this role. These capacities are described in further detail underneath each of the roles.

For example, the COE capacity framework in Appendix C shows one of the primary roles of COEs in advancing the goals of the System of Support: providing differentiated assistance (i.e., Level 2 support) to LEAs in the county. Interviews with state, county, and district leaders suggest that in order for counties to provide differentiated assistance to LEAs, COE staff must have the ability to support LEAs to use qualitative and quantitative data to measure and monitor

improvement at the district level. As such, a number of the other capacities for this county staff role involve the ability to support district offices in continuous improvement.

This structure is replicated at the school, district, county, and state levels: capacities are mapped onto specific roles at each level of the system. The only variance is that within the COE capacity framework, there are specific capacities outlined for Geo Leads—those COEs that seek to build the capacity of county offices within their geographic area; connect counties to each other; and identify, collect, and distribute relevant resources. The full, detailed capacity-building framework is included in the appendices. We provide an overview of some of the core capacities below.

Capacities to apply continuous improvement approaches to problems. Across all levels of the system, one of the most critical capacities in the System of Support is the ability to effectively engage in continuous improvement. These capacities include an understanding of the value of testing ideas on a small scale; the ability to use data effectively to identify areas for improvement as well as to measure and monitor improvement; the ability to take a systems lens to improvement; the ability to select and apply research-based strategies to address root causes; and the ability to form effective improvement teams. For the state, it includes the ability to evaluate, support, and track ongoing improvement across all levels of the system (state, COEs, LEAs).

Capacities to support others to engage in continuous improvement. While taking a continuous improvement approach in one's own work is necessary to drive improvement within an organization, the System of Support's core premise—building local capacity will improve outcomes for students—also necessitates increasing the ability of various system actors to coach others in improvement work. Accordingly, the capacity framework for COEs includes considerable attention to their capacity to coach LEAs in the application of each component of a continuous improvement approach (e.g. using data, applying a systems lens, and selecting strategies to address root causes). In addition, improvement coaches should be able to identify continuous improvement models (i.e., successful schools, school districts, and counties that are applying a continuous improvement approach) and use these models to understand and share how improvement can happen with other schools, school districts, and COEs.

The state capacity framework—and, to some extent, the school district capacity framework—similarly focus on this improvement coaching role, as the state is charged with providing differentiated assistance to eligible COEs, and school districts must provide improvement coaching to school sites. This coaching role also includes the ability of coaches to act as thought partners to COE, district, or school-level improvement teams to support them in addressing their identified challenges. Because this coaching role, particularly around county-led needs assessments of school districts, is critical to the System of Support, Geo Leads must also have the capacity to support counties in how to conduct a meaningful needs-assessment process with LEAs.

In setting a vision for the System of Support, state leaders and staff need the abilities to clearly articulate the system’s purpose; to delineate roles and responsibilities across state organizations; and to provide clear, ongoing communication to all bodies.

Capacities to provide resources and support based on local needs. Especially critical for the state and COEs (including Geo Leads) is the ability to provide resources and support that are responsive to the needs of COEs and school districts. For example, schools and districts need to be able to support teachers and schools in using effective instructional strategies based on local needs. Relatedly, staff at COEs (including those that are also Geo Leads) and within state organizations should be able to broker connections between districts and appropriate support providers. Resource brokers must also have the ability to provide meaningful opportunities for system leaders to connect with each other—that is, to collaborate and learn from each other. This set of capacities requires the ability both to assess local needs and to match resources, opportunities for collaboration, and technical assistance based on those needs.

Capacities to take a relational approach. The System of Support is predicated on the idea that improvement work requires relational trust. A relational approach means adopting a trusting, empathic, respectful, nonjudgmental, positive, and open approach when working with others (Reimer 2017). Using a continuous improvement approach requires listening to and actively involving those with different roles and perspectives in order to better understand root causes of problems and to come up with better solutions. To achieve this aim, individuals at all levels of the system need to be able to engage openly with other system actors—as well as with members of the community—as part of the work of system improvement. Accordingly, the ability to develop and foster a relational approach to problem solving between different agencies is a critical skill for those at every level of the system. This set of capacities requires a culture shift and relates to the ability of system actors to take a service-based orientation towards their work—a departure from a historical focus on compliance. For the agencies involved in state-level coordination of the System of Support, their ability to create a coherent communication structure and to ensure that decisions are informed by leaders within each of the three lead state entities is predicated on their ability to take a relational approach to their work with other agencies on the Coordination Team.

Capacities to engage others to inform the ongoing improvement of support at all levels. As some system leaders reported, the System of Support should function as “one big feedback loop,” requiring ongoing and meaningful engagement as well as robust communication channels between the state, COEs, and school districts to ensure continuous improvement of the System of Support itself. This requires the ability of Geo Leads and the state to gather comprehensive feedback from LEAs and other COEs on their needs and the quality of support currently provided, as well as the ability to hear from people on the ground about what improvements to state policies are needed. It also necessitates the ability of Geo Leads to serve as liaisons to the Coordination Team when specific needs arise, or to share concerns with the Coordination Team on behalf of COEs.

Application of the Capacity Framework

The capacity framework provides additional nuance to the theory of action behind how the System of Support will lead to system improvement. As such, the framework has at least four potential uses.

- **Provide clear objectives for building capacity.** The first use is to provide leaders and staff at each level of the system a clear sense of the kinds of capacities they are aiming to develop in both their organization and the organizations they support. This can act as a “north star” that facilitates the use of common language and practices throughout the System of Support. One state leader noted that they would like to share the framework with their team to determine whether they are providing clear learning opportunities that are linked to the capacities.
- **Act as a self-assessment tool.** The second use, which was most frequently cited by county and state leaders, is to allow organizations to assess their own abilities when it comes to their roles in the System of Support. Knowing which capacities are being developed statewide can better inform the areas that system leaders might seek to improve. State and county leaders noted that if the capacity framework were linked to a self-assessment rubric, leaders at all levels of the system could rate themselves in each of the capacities and use the assessment as a tool for self-reflection and development. One state leader also noted that a self-assessment tool could be used at the end of a differentiated assistance process to reflect on that engagement:

Or if not just during the DA [differentiated assistance] process, the rubric could be used any time two parties come together to solve a problem. It would give each person or team the ability to rate themselves and the other entity. ... So much of this work is not super tangible, but it's important to be able to tie it to something tangible (like a DA process or some other specific process).

A county leader similarly noted that county leaders “want to think through where they are in their own ability to address the improvement needs of their districts and what they would need to do to improve how they're operating.” Another leader noted that the capacity framework could be used as a capacity development tool through which a district might be able to know whether and how it is fulfilling its role.

- **Assess where additional support is needed.** The third use is to allow leaders and staff to more easily determine how best to support other organizations. For example, COEs can use the capacity framework to assess the capacities of a given district in order to determine how best to coach district leaders and staff. Geo Leads can use the capacity

framework to understand which capacities county offices in their geographic region need to further develop in order to determine which resources the Geo Lead can deploy.

- **Guide evaluation of the system.** The fourth use, as noted earlier, is to use standardized indicators, based on the capacity framework, to measure progress statewide at all levels of the system. Several leaders noted that it would be helpful to connect each of the capacities with examples of evidence. Specifically, they asked for clear, concrete features of each capacity, and what it is expected to look like in practice. Leaders also noted that there is value in creating a shared understanding across different levels of the system of what the roles are, which can help alleviate uncertainty. Accordingly, the capacity framework may help to inform a process evaluation of the System of Support. Questions posed to leaders of LEAs and COEs can help assess the degree to which the System of Support has developed these specific capacities in order to know where the state has made progress and where there is still work to be done.

Conclusion

To realize a successful System of Support that is based upon the principles and practices of continuous improvement, implementation must go deeper than specific tools, protocols, or processes of improvement methods themselves. Furthermore, it is critical to identify explicitly and test the full set of assumptions that are part of the state’s new accountability system. The research conducted for this project was intended to contribute to the development of a more robust framework for testing the assumptions behind the System of Support and allowing for the deployment of support where organizational conditions or capacities are falling short.

Prior to engaging in improvement work, leaders and their staff need to prepare for a new way of working. Preparing for improvement is an opportunity to engage staff and the community in conversations about the current state of the organization and the extent to which the organizational conditions enable the work of continuous improvement. Some questions that can support these preparations include: What are our strengths? What are the areas where we need improvement? Who needs more support? What kinds of support? How can we work better together?

In addition to specifying the improvement roles and responsibilities of leaders, staff, and partners—and investing in a robust professional learning strategy—resources must be developed to support the practical application of the framework. For example, a resource that provides a series of “look-fors” for each of the individual capacities could help leaders to assess more effectively the capacities of their own organization and the organizations they support. In addition, some county and state leaders indicated that a rubric would help them better assess themselves, their teams, and their organizations.

The organizational conditions and individual capacities framework was drafted based on input from state, county, and district leaders over the course of 2 years and reflects the experiences and perspectives of the improvement professionals and education leaders who are part of the System of Support. As we continue to better understand the evolution of roles and responsibilities of the state, COEs, districts, and schools, this framework serves as a working hypothesis of how the full improvement ecosystem should continue to develop to meet the goals of the System of Support.

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Appendix A

School-Level Enabling Conditions and Capacities for Continuous Improvement in the System of Support

Enabling Condition	Element	Description
Shared Purpose	Student-Centered purpose	Staff and leaders have codeveloped (with school stakeholders) an ambitious and student-centered school purpose.
	Equity focus	Staff and leaders are committed to improving all students' outcomes—regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, background, or disability classification.
	Differentiated roles	Staff and leaders know their individual role in achieving the school's purpose and goals.
	Sense of urgency	Staff and leaders share a sense of urgency to achieve this purpose.
	Constancy of purpose	Leaders have processes in place to limit strategically the number of school initiatives to maintain a constancy of purpose.
Culture of Mutual Trust	Relational trust	Relational trust exists between and among staff, leaders, students, and families.
	Psychological safety	Staff and leaders are able to engage in learning behaviors (e.g., admitting failures, expressing dissent, or taking risks) without fear of punishment or threat.
	Leading improvement by example	School leaders engage in continuous improvement in their work; model testing ideas as well as learning from failures.
	Support, not mandate	Leaders model service and support to staff, students, and families (as opposed to enforcing mandates and compliance).
	Collective efficacy	School staff and leaders believe in their collective ability to affect all students' outcomes.
Structures and Resources that Foster Collaborative Work	Protected time and effective processes	There is protected time for leaders and staff to work together to improve.
	Sufficient and sustainable improvement resources	The school has sufficient resources to sustain improvement, including support personnel, training, funding, and materials.
	Breaking down silos	Leaders and staff establish norms and routines for working together and across disciplines.
	Data infrastructure	Infrastructure and staffing exists to collect, manage, and facilitate the use of data, including problem diagnosis, testing change ideas, and improvement monitoring.
	Stakeholder engagement	Schools meaningfully engage a wide range of stakeholders in improvement work, including teachers, support staff, students, families, and community members.
Preparation and Mobilization of Improvement Capacities	Identification of the set of knowledge and skills for improvement	Schools understand the set of knowledge and skills for improvement necessary to develop within the organization.
	Role assignment	Baseline improvement capacity is developed in all staff, with specialized capacity developed for differentiated improvement roles.
	Professional learning	The school has consistent and intentional professional learning strategies in place for increasing staff improvement capacities.

School-Level Capacities (Knowledge and Skills) for Achieving the Goals of the System of Support

Meet the learning needs of every student.

- Ability to examine systems, rather than looking at problems in isolation, as an approach to understanding problems and introducing changes.
- Ability to make decisions about the focus of improvement efforts using data and evidence.
- Ability to find appropriate resources to address knowledge and support gaps.
- Ability to develop trusting relationships with students, families, community members, and colleagues in the school district.
- Ability to identify, support, and share knowledge about good instruction.

Address disparities in learning opportunities and outcomes.

- Ability to analyze student data to identify areas for improvement.
- Understanding of how bias can influence interpretations of data, and a willingness to challenge biases.
- Ability to engage the community to identify and understand the root causes of underperformance and participate in decisions about how to address challenges.
- Ability to select strategies to address identified root cause(s).
- Ability to apply research-based strategies for improving learning outcomes for specific student groups (e.g., English learners, students with disabilities).

Sustain improvement efforts.

- Ability to facilitate the development of intentional, systematic approaches to change.
- Ability to use qualitative and quantitative data to measure and monitor improvement.
- Understanding the value of testing ideas on a small scale.
- Ability to secure the necessary resources and supports for their school to continuously improve student outcomes.

Appendix B

District-Level Enabling Conditions and Capacities for Continuous Improvement in the System of Support

Enabling Condition	Element	Description
Shared Purpose	Student-Centered purpose	The district has codeveloped (with school and community stakeholders) an ambitious and student-centered school purpose.
	Equity focus	District staff are committed and take action to improve all students' outcomes—regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, background, or disability classification.
	Differentiated roles	District staff know their individual role in achieving the school's purpose and goals.
	Sense of urgency	District staff share a sense of urgency to achieve this purpose.
	Constancy of purpose	District leaders have processes in place to limit strategically the number of initiatives it takes on itself and requires from schools.
Culture of Mutual Trust	Relational trust	Relational trust exists between and among district staff, schools, and community.
	Psychological safety	District and school staff are able to engage in learning behaviors (e.g., admitting failures, expressing dissent, or taking risks) without fear of punishment or threat.
	Leading improvement by example	The superintendent or cabinet-level official actively promotes and applies the use of an improvement approach.
	Support, not mandate	The district has an orientation towards service and support to schools (as opposed to enforcing mandates and compliance).
	Collective efficacy	District staff believe in their collective ability to affect all students' outcomes.
Structures and Resources that Foster Collaborative Work	Protected time and effective processes	Collective bargaining agreements support effective school-level improvement efforts as well as districtwide collaboration and shared learning.
	Sufficient and sustainable improvement resources	Resources are sufficient and sustainable to support school- and district-level improvement efforts (including adequate staffing and time).
	Breaking down silos	District departments have norms, routines, and opportunities for working together within and across departments.
	Data infrastructure	Infrastructure and staffing exists to collect, manage, and facilitate the use of data, including problem diagnosis, testing change ideas, and improvement monitoring.
	Stakeholder engagement	The district meaningfully engages a wide range of stakeholders in improvement work, including teachers, students, families, and community members.
Preparation and Mobilization of Improvement Capacities	Identification of the set of knowledge and skills for improvement	District leaders understand the set of knowledge and skills for improvement necessary to develop within the organization.
	Role assignment	Baseline improvement capacity is developed in all district staff, with specialized capacity developed for differentiated roles.
	Professional learning	The district has consistent and intentional professional learning strategies in place for increasing staff improvement capacities.

District Capacities (Knowledge and Skills) for Achieving the Goals of the System of Support

Support schools to improve student outcomes.

- Ability to take a relational approach to support for schools.
- Ability to support school leaders to select and implement strategies to address identified root cause(s).
- Ability to facilitate the development of intentional, systematic approaches to change at the school level.
- Ability to support school leaders to use qualitative and quantitative data to measure and monitor improvement.
- Ability to identify, support, and share knowledge about good instruction.
- Ability to apply research-based instructional strategies for improving learning outcomes for specific student groups (e.g., English learners, students with disabilities).
- Ability to use exemplary strategies to understand and share how improvement can happen with other schools within the district.
- Ability to identify and provide support that is responsive to school needs.
- Ability to act as a thought partner to school improvement teams to support them in addressing the school's identified challenges.

Engage in sustainable district-level improvement work.

- Ability to take a relational approach to support for improvement work across departments within the central office.
- Ability to analyze student- and school-level data to identify areas for improvement.
- Ability to apply a systems lens to understanding the root causes of underperformance and introducing changes.
- Ability to select strategies to address identified root cause(s).
- Understanding of the value of testing ideas on a small scale.
- Ability to make decisions using data and evidence.
- Ability to use qualitative and quantitative data to measure and monitor improvement at the district level.
- Ability to engage in difficult conversations about racism and other systemic inequities in a way that is safe and productive.
- Ability to establish a high-functioning, cross-disciplinary improvement team that can collectively address specific district challenges.
- Ability to identify strategies of successful schools.
- Ability to work collaboratively with the COE and external service providers to strengthen improvement work.
- Ability to take a relational approach to improvement work with the COE and other support providers.
- Understanding of how bias can influence interpretations of data, and a willingness to challenge biases.

Use the Local Control Accountability Plan to guide improvement planning.

- Ability to formulate district improvement plans and strategically use the LCAP to document goals, student needs, and programs.
- Ability to articulate the district's improvement approach/methodology.

Facilitate regular, meaningful engagement opportunities with schools, families, and community stakeholders as part of all phases of the improvement process.

- Ability to engage the community to identify and understand the root cause(s) of underperformance.
- Ability to engage students, families, and the community in decisions about how to address challenges in the district.
- Ability to take a relational approach to engagement with students, families, and community members.

Appendix C

County Office of Education-Level Enabling Conditions and Capacities for Continuous Improvement

Enabling Condition	Element	Description
Shared Purpose	Student-Centered purpose	The COE has an ambitious and student-centered purpose that prioritizes affecting students' outcomes and supporting districts and schools.
	Equity focus	COE staff are committed to improving all students' outcomes—regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, background, or disability classification.
	Differentiated roles	COE staff know their individual roles in achieving the COE's purpose and goals as well as how that directly contributes to affecting students and supporting districts.
	Sense of urgency	COE staff share a sense of urgency to achieve the COE's purpose.
	Constancy of purpose	COE leaders have processes in place to limit strategically the number of initiatives it takes on for itself, as well as how many it builds support for among districts.
Culture of Mutual Trust	Relational trust	Trust exists among COE staff and between the COE and districts.
	Psychological safety	County and district staff are able to engage in learning behaviors (e.g., admitting failures, expressing dissent, or taking risks) without fear of punishment or threat.
	Leading improvement by example	The COE itself engages in continuous improvement and models the testing of ideas and learning from failures.
	Support, not mandate	The COE is oriented towards service and support to schools and districts (as opposed to enforcing mandates and compliance).
	Collective efficacy	COE staff believe in their collective ability to affect all students' outcomes.
Structures and Resources that Foster Collaborative Work	Protected time and effective processes	COE support to districts reflects a commitment to improvement, prioritizing process and the time it takes to progress.
	Sufficient and sustainable improvement resources	Resources are sufficient and sustainable to support school-, district-, and county-level improvement efforts (including adequate staffing and time).
	Breaking down silos	COE departments have norms, routines, and opportunities for working together within and across departments.
	Data infrastructure	Infrastructure and staffing exists to collect, manage, and facilitate the use of data, including problem diagnosis, testing change ideas, and improvement monitoring.
	Stakeholder engagement	The COE meaningfully engages a range of stakeholders in improvement work, including teachers, students, community, and external support providers.
Preparation and Mobilization of Improvement Capacities	Identification of the set of knowledge and skills for improvement	COE leaders understand the set of knowledge and skills necessary to lead improvement efforts within the county, and can support districts to do the same.
	Role assignment	Baseline improvement capacity is developed in all COE staff, with specialized capacity developed for differentiated roles.
	Professional learning	The COE has consistent and intentional professional learning strategies in place for increasing staff improvement capacities and has capacity to facilitate professional learning of improvement in districts.

County Office of Education Capacities (Knowledge and Skills) for Achieving the Goals of the System of Support

Provide universal support (i.e., Level 1) to all Local Educational Agencies and county-run schools in the county.

- Ability to take a relational approach to support for LEAs and county-run schools.
- Ability to analyze student-, school-, and district-level data to identify areas for improvement.
- Ability to use qualitative and quantitative data to measure and monitor improvement at the district level.
- Ability to connect resources to address district needs.
- Ability to identify, support, and share knowledge about high-quality instruction and other successful practices, particularly strategies for improving outcomes for specific student groups (e.g., English learners, students with disabilities).
- Ability to identify and provide support that is responsive to district needs.

Provide differentiated assistance (i.e., Level 2 support) to Local Educational Agencies in the county.

- Ability to support LEAs to analyze student- and school-level data to identify areas for improvement.
- Ability to support LEAs to apply a systems lens to understanding the root cause(s) of underperformance and introducing changes.
- Ability to support LEAs to select strategies to address identified root cause(s).
- Understanding of the value of testing ideas on a small scale.
- Ability to act as a thought partner to LEA improvement teams to support them in addressing the LEA's identified challenges.
- Ability to support LEAs to make decisions using data and evidence.
- Ability to support LEAs to use qualitative and quantitative data to measure and monitor improvement at the district level.
- Ability to support LEAs to engage in difficult conversations about racism and other systemic inequities in a way that is safe and productive.
- Ability to support LEAs to establish a high-functioning, cross-disciplinary improvement team that can collectively address specific district challenges.
- Ability to support LEAs to identify strategies of successful schools.
- Ability to support LEAs to secure and deploy the necessary resources and supports to schools based on need.
- Ability to broker connections between LEAs receiving differentiated assistance and resource providers with the expertise to address identified areas for improvement.
- Ability to support LEA leaders in articulating the district's improvement approach/methodology.
- Understanding of how bias can influence interpretations of data and a willingness to challenge biases.

Geographic Lead Agencies Capacities (Knowledge and Skills) for Achieving the Goals of the System of Support

Build the capacity of county offices within their geographic area to provide effective improvement support to their respective districts.

- Ability to take a relational approach to support for COEs in the region.
- Ability to measure the capacity of COEs and determine necessary support.
- Ability to provide high-quality professional learning opportunities to counties that increase improvement capacity.
- Ability to support counties to conduct a meaningful needs-assessment process with LEAs.
- Ability to identify and provide support that is responsive to county needs.
- Ability to engage in their own continuous improvement work, and modeling the testing of ideas and learning from failures.
- Ability to support counties to improve data use (both visualization and discussions around data) to guide improvement efforts.

Connect counties to each other and to external assistance providers, as well as to lead agencies that can support them and the districts they serve.

- Ability to develop trusting relationships among counties in the geographic area.
- Ability to provide opportunities for COEs to learn from each other both within their geographic area and beyond.
- Ability to collaborate with other Geo Leads and other state leads in order to facilitate networked learning.
- Ability to connect COEs with other state leads based on their specific needs.
- Ability to assess and map assets among COEs in their geographic area.

Communicate the needs of Local Educational Agencies and County Offices of Education to state agencies.

- Ability to serve as liaisons with the Coordination Team (CCEE, SBE, and CDE) when specific needs arise, or to share concerns with the Coordination Team on behalf of COEs.
- Ability to develop a relational approach to problem solving between county and state agencies as well as with LEAs.
- Ability to hear from people on the ground what improvements to state policies are needed.
- Ability to gather comprehensive feedback from LEAs and other COEs on their needs for support and the quality of support currently provided.

Appendix D

State-Level Enabling Conditions and Capacities for Continuous Improvement (i.e., California State Board of Education, California Department of Education, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence)

Enabling Condition	Element	Description
Shared Purpose	Student-Centered purpose	The state (SBE) has developed and communicated: (a) a focused set of student-centered priorities for LEAs to pursue, with an emphasis on equity, and (b) a system of support and accountability for reaching those goals.
	Equity focus	State agency staff are committed to affecting all students' outcomes—regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, background, or disability classification.
	Differentiated roles	State actors and agencies have a clear understanding of their individual roles in supporting school improvement and student outcomes, and how these directly contribute to supporting COEs and LEAs.
	Sense of urgency	State leaders share a sense of urgency to fulfill and achieve the state's purpose.
	Constancy of purpose	The state (SBE) develops systems and processes to streamline legislative requirements for schools, districts, and COEs.
Culture of Mutual Trust	Relational trust	Trust exists among state staff and between the state and COE/LEA staff.
	Psychological safety	State agency, COE, and district staff are able to engage in learning behaviors (e.g., admitting failures, expressing dissent, or taking risks) without fear of punishment or threat.
	Leading improvement by example	State agencies work in collaboration to routinely review data and feedback on policy implementation to refine policy development, resource allocation, and the state's theory of action.
	Support, not mandate	State agencies have an orientation towards service and support to counties and districts (as opposed to a culture of mandate and compliance).
	Collective efficacy	State agency staff believe in their collective ability to affect all students' outcomes.
Structures and Resources that Foster Collaborative Work	Protected time and effective processes	The expectations, timing, and level of support from the state reflect a commitment to focused improvement that protects the process as well as the time it takes to make progress.
	Sufficient and sustainable improvement resources	The state (e.g., SBE, Legislature, Governor's Office) provides sufficient, effective, and sustainable funds for county-, district-, and school-level improvement efforts.
	Breaking down silos	State agencies have norms, routines, and opportunities for working together within and across agencies.
	Data infrastructure	The state (CDE) develops a user-friendly data infrastructure aligned to state priorities to inform local improvement and to target support.
	Stakeholder engagement	State agencies meaningfully engage a wide range of stakeholders in improvement work, including teachers, students, community members, support providers, advocacy groups, researchers, and policymakers.
Preparation and Mobilization of Improvement Capacities	Identification of the set of knowledge and skills for improvement	The state (CDE) has framed the set of knowledge and skills for improvement.
	Role assignment	The state (CDE) provides guidance for what constitutes baseline improvement capacity and has identified roles at each level of the System of Support.
	Professional learning	State agencies have provided content to support county-, district-, and school-level improvement efforts (e.g., guidelines, training materials, professional development).

State Capacities (Knowledge and Skills) for Achieving the Goals of the System of Support

Guide ongoing improvements to the System of Support through active participation and collaboration on the Coordination Team.

- Ability to take a relational approach to support for lead agencies and COEs.
- Ability to create a vision for the System of Support.
- Ability to evaluate, support, and track ongoing improvement across all levels of the system (state, COEs, LEAs).
- Ability to engage COEs and LEAs in the continuous improvement of the System of Support.
- Ability to help other system leaders understand how their work fits into the broad goals of the System of Support.
- Ability to create a coherent communication structure and ensure decisions are informed by leaders within each of the three lead state entities.
- Ability to deploy support where it is needed (at all levels of the system).

Provide differentiated assistance to eligible County Offices of Education.

- Ability to help COE leaders to examine their systems—rather than focus on problems in isolation—to understand root cause(s) of challenges.
- Ability to support COEs to analyze student- and school-level data to identify areas for improvement.
- Ability to support COEs to apply a systems lens to understanding the root cause(s) of underperformance and to introducing changes.
- Ability to support COEs to select strategies to address identified root cause(s).
- Understanding of the value of testing ideas on a small scale.
- Ability to act as a thought partner to COE improvement teams to support them in addressing the COE's identified challenges.
- Ability to support COEs to make decisions using data and evidence.
- Ability to support COEs to use qualitative and quantitative data to measure and monitor improvement in county-run schools.
- Ability to support COEs to engage in difficult conversations about racism and other systemic inequities in a way that is safe and productive.
- Ability to support COEs to establish a high-functioning, cross-disciplinary improvement team that can collectively address specific challenges in county-run schools.
- Ability to support COEs to secure and deploy the necessary resources and supports to county-run schools based on need.
- Ability to broker connections between COEs receiving differentiated assistance and resource providers with the expertise to address identified areas for improvement.
- Ability to support COE leaders to articulate the county's improvement approach/methodology.

Align state funding and policies based on research and the needs identified through the Dashboard, feedback from system leaders, and other data sources.

- Ability to provide clear, ongoing communication about core components of the work of the System of Support to the SBE and to the Department of Finance to ensure alignment between the System of Support and other key policies.
- Ability to hear from people on the ground what improvements to state policies are needed.

Connect lead agencies, County Offices of Education, and Local Educational Agencies to resources.

- Ability to share existing research-based instructional strategies for improving learning outcomes for specific student groups (e.g., English learners, students with disabilities).
- Ability to identify, support, and share knowledge about high-quality instruction, operations, systems management, and other ancillary student supports based on the needs of the COE or LEA.
- Ability to gather comprehensive feedback from LEAs, COEs, and lead agencies on their needs for support and the quality of support currently provided.

Clarify and disseminate information on the System of Support and its components to increase understanding and buy-in.

- Ability to articulate clearly what constitutes Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 support.
- Ability to articulate clearly the “why” of the System of Support.
- Ability to articulate clearly the roles and responsibilities at different levels of the system (lead agencies, COEs, LEAs).
- Ability to define clearly SBE, CDE, and CCEE’s roles and responsibilities in the System of Support.

Provide capacity-building, coordination, and collaboration support for lead agencies.

- Ability to provide high-quality professional learning opportunities to lead agencies.
- Ability to provide opportunities for lead agencies to learn from each other.
- Ability to provide capacity-building opportunities to lead agencies.
- Ability to listen openly and learn from lead agencies to inform efforts to strengthen the System of Support.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence

PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

- 1 bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;
- 2 making research evidence accessible; and
- 3 leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.



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