



# GETTING DOWN — TO FACTS II —

RESEARCH BRIEF | SEPTEMBER 2018

## Creating Coherent Systems to Support Education Improvement

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**About:** The Getting Down to Facts project seeks to create a common evidence base for understanding the current state of California school systems and lay the foundation for substantive conversations about what education policies should be sustained and what might be improved to ensure increased opportunity and success for all students in California in the decades ahead. *Getting Down to Facts II* follows approximately a decade after the first Getting Down to Facts effort in 2007. This research brief is one of 19 that summarize 36 research studies that cover four main areas related to state education policy: student success, governance, personnel, and funding.

This brief summarizes three *Getting Down to Facts II* technical reports on governance issues facing California education:

**Federal Policy Meets “the California Way”**

Jeffrey R. Henig and Melissa Arnold Lyon, September 2018.

**State Structures for Instructional Support in California**

Susan L. Moffitt, Matthew J. Lyddon, Domingo Morel, Michaela Krug O’Neill, Kelly B. Smith, Cadence Willse, and David K. Cohen, September 2018.

**Building a System of Support for School Improvement**

David N. Plank, Jennifer O’Day, and Benjamin Cottingham, September 2018.

This brief also draws on another *Getting Down to Facts II* technical report:

**Frontline Perspectives on Instructional Support in the Common Core Era**

Susan L. Moffitt, Matthew J. Lyddon, Michaela Krug O’Neill, Kelly B. Smith, Marie Schenk, Cadence Willse, and David K. Cohen, September 2018.

These and all GDTFII studies can be found at [www.gettingdowntofacts.com](http://www.gettingdowntofacts.com).

## Introduction

California’s education policy agenda, in particular the near-simultaneous implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), has created challenges and opportunities for the state. Coming on the heels of the Great Recession of 2008, these enormous shifts—the demands for substantially new teaching practices required by the CCSS and the fundamental shift from a state-controlled education finance system to locally determined priorities and resource allocation—require new infusions of support to help school districts realize these policies’ ambitious goals. At the same time, shifting federal policies may have an unanticipated or unpredictable impact on state efforts and priorities.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. California's simultaneous implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has created a need for new or augmented systems of support for school districts.
2. Sources of support for instructional improvement include professional networks and the California Department of Education (CDE), which in particular does not currently have the capacity to fully support these needs.
3. Putting school districts on a path to continuous improvement will require careful implementation of the current System of Support or of a similarly intentional approach.
4. Successful development and implementation of support mechanisms for implementing both CCSS and the LCFF hinge on multiagency cooperation.
5. The state's efforts to improve education can be supported or thrown off course by federal policies, making it important for state leaders to strategically manage relations with Washington, D.C., and potential allies in other states.

## Summary of Key Findings

### California's simultaneous implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has created a need for new or augmented systems of support for school districts

California has maintained consistent support for the CCSS, a set of college- and career-readiness standards in English language arts/literacy and mathematics in grades K-12. Effectively implementing these standards, and the new assessments that accompany them, requires significant changes in teaching practice. Bringing about such changes depends to a large extent on California's ability to develop a coherent system of instructional support.

The LCFF, introduced at the same time as the CCSS, shifts substantial control of education resources from the state to local school districts and marks a fundamental realignment of fiscal decision making in California. The LCFF gives local leaders the freedom to set local priorities for the use of resources and to adapt local policies and practices to the needs and circumstances of their communities. With added dollars for supports and services for three underserved groups of students—low-income students, English learners, and foster youth—the LCFF aims to substantially reduce or eliminate opportunity gaps. Like the CCSS, the LCFF is not self-actualizing. Districts need support as they move to this new system of local control.

Many districts report that they look to the state for help. This includes turning to the state for guidance and information on Common Core–related issues, such as instructional materials, as well as for LCFF and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) implementation.

## Sources of support for instructional improvement include professional networks and the California Department of Education (CDE), which in particular does not currently have the capacity to fully support these needs

Promoting CCSS implementation and creating a statewide instructional support system represents an enormous task. To be sure, California has made some demonstrable progress in recent years. Results of a January 2018 RAND American Teacher Panel survey show that more than a third of California teachers report some improvement in the alignment between instructional materials and California's grade-level standards, the alignment between district professional development and teachers' needs, the quality of district professional development, and school-level professional learning communities. Results in the professional development arena are particularly encouraging. Nearly half of teachers report improved alignment between the professional development they receive from their districts and their needs as teachers, with 33% reporting "a little improvement" and an additional 15% perceiving "a lot of improvement."

Yet, the task of providing the needed instructional support remains challenging, all the more so because of the importance of the CDE as a source of such support. The department's efforts to move from a compliance organization to one focused on support is complex. The CDE remains somewhat hobbled by both a dearth of internal subject-matter expertise on instructional improvement and low staff salaries. Insufficient subject-matter expertise makes it difficult for districts to rely on the CDE for subject-specific assistance. Low pay relative to districts and counties makes it difficult for the CDE to recruit and retain high-quality staff.

Interviews with state and regional leaders reveal strong support for current CDE leadership and the direction it has taken to orient the agency toward creating partnerships that encourage instructional improvement. Yet, superintendents also voice concern about whether the recent changes in CDE direction will have a chance to take root.

California's system of professional networks has emerged as a key component of the state's approach to the puzzles of coordinating instructional support. Horizontally, rather than vertically, organized networks are able to facilitate collaborative activity to solve problems a single governmental organization cannot effectively tackle. California's rich array of networks, including the California Subject Matter Projects, Rural Professional Learning Network, Regional Assessment Network, and the California Next Generation Science Standards K-8 Early Implementation Initiative reflect a range of partnerships designed to meet a variety of needs including professional development, assistance with selecting new instructional materials, and support implementing new curriculum. Networks allow organizational and individual participants to engage in continuous learning and often offer an important "just in time" tailored support. Without care, however, networks can suffer from overload, isolation, and ambiguity.

## Putting school districts on a path to continuous improvement will require careful implementation of the current System of Support or of a similarly intentional approach

Local flexibility and increased resources are not sufficient to produce improvement in the performance of schools and students. California policymakers have laid out guidelines for a System of Support to provide flexible and context-specific assistance to any district that is not making sufficient progress on its own.

The state's System of Support, still in its fledgling stage, brings together the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), the CDE, and county offices of education to tailor support to individual districts' needs. This system is not yet fully operational; many questions about how it will do its work remain unanswered.

CCEE is a new agency, created under the LCFF, whose roles and responsibilities are still developing. The CDE, which largely has been a compliance agency overseeing state and federal programs, now is being reorganized to become a support organization, a very different mission that will require fundamentally different skills and expertise.

County offices of education, tasked under the System of Support with providing direct support to school districts, must make significant shifts in their mission, staffing, and focus. They face a steep learning curve themselves and will need support to do their jobs well. Moreover, the sheer number of districts needing assistance (as identified by the [California Dashboard's](#) ratings of student success) could quickly overwhelm county offices' ability to provide effective support.

## Successful development and implementation of support mechanisms for implementing both CCSS and the LCFF hinge on multiagency cooperation

Successful continuing implementation of both CCSS and the LCFF depends on how effectively diverse agencies are able to work with local school districts to build their capacity to improve school performance. It also depends on how effectively these agencies are able to work with one another. Sustainable collaboration among agencies will require clarification of the roles that each is expected to play in still-developing support systems.

California has an emerging record on which to build. A consistent theme in interviews with state and regional leaders was the collaborative working relationships among state-level organizations. Despite fragmented state-level governance—many players with often less-than-clear roles and responsibilities—interviewees frequently commented on the spirit of cross-agency collaboration that has marked Gov. Jerry Brown's administration. They also strike a note of caution, however, suggesting that collaboration has been dependent on current state leadership rather than embedded in governance structures themselves. Thus, some question the durability of the gains that have been made in cross-agency collaboration.

Successful support mechanisms to move implementation of CCSS and the LCFF further along will require ongoing efforts by the state to ensure collaboration among organizations and agencies not necessarily used to collaborating with one another. As essential as collaboration seems for success, putting it into practice will require sustained political will.

## The state's efforts to improve education can be supported or thrown off course by federal policies, making it important for state leaders to strategically manage relations with Washington, D.C., and potential allies in other states

What impact might new or different federal policies have on California's education improvement efforts? This will depend not only on national funding and regulation specifically targeted at schools, but also on an array of federal actions and failures to act that affect schools indirectly by helping or hurting children, families, and communities.

The federal government sends significant dollars to California: \$7.5 billion for elementary and secondary programs. Although a shift in federal policy could jeopardize some of this support, a more significant impact could be felt in other areas. Immigration, tax, and labor policies are not ostensibly related to education, but still can have a substantial impact on schools and students.

Consider immigration policy. California's large immigrant student population is under a great deal of stress. The uncertainty caused by current federal immigration policies exacerbates the potential for health problems that can directly affect school performance. Those districts likely to be most heavily affected by immigration issues are also those with other high needs, creating a potential equity issue that presents special challenges in the context of the LCFF. High-needs districts may be forced to shift their attention to the stress- and health-related concerns of some of their most vulnerable students at the expense of other important needs. Although schools and districts have little, if any, capacity to address the cause of this challenge, they do have some capability, incentive, and responsibility to address the effects (such as increasing the number of counselors). But doing so will drain already limited resources.

State leaders face two major challenges going forward: the need to maintain an intrastate political coalition that can support the state's vision of local control when resources are leaner; and an external coalition with other state and national leaders to strategically forestall harmful federal actions and exploit areas of national policies where they align with state interests.

## Conclusion

The major policy shifts embodied in the Common Core State Standards and the Local Control Funding Formula signal great ambition as well as the need for substantial support to implement these policies. Improvement takes time and depends on sufficient policy stability. District and other organizational leaders are urging the state to "stay the course," while being clear about their need for ongoing and multifaceted support. Under the LCFF-generated System of Support, the state hopes that districts will have the capacity to identify local needs and strengths, develop strategies, seek the necessary assistance, and take actions to improve the performance of schools and students. The next administration will have much to ponder and much to do.

## Lead Author Biographies

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