

The Importance of Systems Alignment: Developing a Coherent Approach to Educational Governance and Finance Reform in California

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Statement of the Problem

As superintendents and administrators of California districts, we are committed to taking the actions necessary to raise the achievement level of all students while simultaneously closing the achievement gap. We are committed to reaching the point where all students graduate from our schools ready to succeed in higher education or enter the work force in a job with significant economic growth potential.

We strongly believe that the quality of instructional practice can trump other factors that may limit the ability of some students to succeed in school. It is therefore incumbent on us – all of us – to ensure that high quality instructional practice in every classroom everyday is the focus of everyone's work. Only with such focus and the committed action to back it up, can we hope to achieve the goal of providing all our students with the opportunity to graduate with meaningful choices about their future.

The challenge of getting all parts of the system to work together to achieve this goal is one of the most important we face. In the past decade, California has made progress toward instituting a standards-based system with the potential for aligning policy and resources in a coherent and strategic direction. However, current policy and practice fail in very substantial ways to realize the alignment and coherence promised by standards -based reform and necessary to accomplish the goals we hold for all our students. The "Getting Down to Facts" compendium of studies chronicles many of the sources and forms of educational policy fragmentation in California. Multiple decision-makers, interest group politics, and policy by accretion rather than strategic deliberation have undermined any moves toward system coherence.

Among the examples of fragmentation discussed in the papers and experienced daily in our districts are the following:

- A conflicted and confusing approach to accountability. On the one hand, schools and districts are held accountable for producing results for students; on the other, we are constrained at every turn by a myriad of process rules and regulations for which we are also held accountable. The excessive regulations engender a compliance mentality throughout the system, from the state capital down into our classrooms. This focus on compliance undermines results-based accountability, distracts attention from the real goals, and inhibits us from finding and using the most effective approaches to serving all our students well. Even within the results-based aspects of our accountability systems, we lack coherence. The differences in measures, programs, and interventions between the state API (PSAA) and the federal AYP (NCLB) systems send mixed messages to school personnel and increase the likelihood that schools will be found wanting by at least one of these measures.
- Failure to implement and fund a comprehensive data system at the state and local level that make it possible for districts to diagnose student needs, monitor student progress and determine the effectiveness of policies, programs, and practices. A strong data system, with unique student identifiers and vertically aligned assessments, is essential for measuring progress and ensuring both results-based accountability and evidence-based instructional and system improvement strategies.
- Conflicting and overlapping categorical programs, many of which have little if any relevance to standards and results and contain duplicative and conflicting requirements regarding reports, plans and processes. State reliance on categorical funding leaves districts with little real discretion in designing programs to meet their students' needs. If districts are to be held accountable for results – as they should be – then they have to have more control over the strategies and actions that will lead to staff and student success.
- Restrictions on the purchase and use of instructional materials that limit instructional options and can get in the way of producing high outcomes for all students. The current adoption cycle is costly, while districts lack flexibility in selecting materials that they believe (based on evidence) will be most effective for their students.
- An unpredictable state budget cycle that makes strategic planning difficult and thus undermines coherence in district strategies and programs. This cycle also adversely affects the timing of decisions that should be made regarding the employment and retention of staff.
- Overly restrictive credentialing, evaluation, tenure, and professional development policies that are not well aligned with standards and performance goals and that negatively impact district decisions about hiring, retaining, training, and evaluating staff.
- Policy development and administration that lacks an adequate evidence base, derived either from research or from program evaluations.

These and other areas of needed policy reform are addressed in the accompanying policy briefs on improving the state data system, on moving away from reliance on categorical funding, and on personnel concerns. In this brief, we focus on the need for all these reform initiatives to be aligned around the common purpose of reaching the state standards and reducing performance gaps among groups of California students.

The issue of alignment is critical to us because research on best practices strongly suggests that system coherence – at the school, district, and state levels – is far more likely to produce the desired results than a system plagued by fragmented programs, confusing goals, and misaligned regulations. Moreover, coherence in support of high quality instruction and improved student achievement is relevant not only to instructional personnel. It must incorporate the funding and business divisions, the human resources policies and offices, the facilities and management information offices, state and local governance bodies, and communications with stakeholders.

Yet the importance of systems alignment is neither well appreciated nor well understood. One of the primary implications of the Getting Down to Facts studies is that many parts of the system must improve but they must do so together. Focusing on one to the detriment of the other undermines the ability of the entire system to move forward. That is why our policy recommendations firmly state that policy responses to Getting Down to Facts findings must be coherent and comprehensive – that is, they must address all the major areas noted in the studies even if all recommendations cannot be implemented at once. We believe that a timeline that calls for action on the major policy recommendations in a staged manner over a defined period is not only an acceptable but also a desirable approach.

Our recommendations are also based on the belief that the state’s primary role is to set standards, establish expected targets, hold districts accountable for success, and provide districts the resources and local flexibility required to produce results.

Recommended Policy Approach

In this brief we focus not on particular policy recommendations but rather on a recommended overarching approach to making the needed changes. (See our other briefs for more specific policy recommendations.) We emphasize three key aspects of this approach:

1. The reform of state policy should reflect a comprehensive, coherent and long-term vision for the governance and finance of California’s educational enterprise.

Our first recommendation stems directly from our prior discussion. We view the many of the findings of the Getting Down to Facts studies and the policy recommendations emerging from those findings to reflect the need for a larger reform strategy. Our concern is that the policy response to these findings will be piecemeal and subject more to political maneuvering than strategic vision. Such an approach will not work in the long run and will in fact undermine continued improvement efforts. What is needed instead is a strategy that focuses on the whole, recognizing that the reform of all the identified systems is necessary and that it must be carried out in a clear and coherent manner.

A well-aligned education reform system that makes high quality instructional practice the focus of everyone’s work will create a much better context for success making it possible to achieve our goal of giving all our students meaningful choices about their future upon graduation from our schools.

Such an approach will not be easy. It will require foresight, political restraint, and time. Indeed, recognizing that everything cannot be done at once, we suggest that an explicit staged timeline be developed. In this approach, actions on different elements of the system would be mapped over an extended period – say a five year time frame. More straightforward (though still fundamental) changes – such as the full funding and implementation of the CALPADS data system – could be

accomplished on the front end. Indeed, we believe the data system is an excellent place to start, as it is absolutely crucial to realizing a more standards-based approach to accountability and instructional improvement. Moreover, the legislation is already in place – and has been so for some time – and the main missing ingredient is the funding to fully populate the system.

Other areas – such as fundamental overhaul of the finance system – would require further study and opportunities for stakeholder input and so would also need more time to design and implement. For example, to move away from categorical allocations necessitates that as a state we develop and agree upon an alternative funding system (such as a weighted student formula) that would allocate money based on identified student need. Such a major shift would involve significant design and implementation issues that require forethought and planning. Similarly, addressing the problem of our unpredictable budget cycle – also a key roadblock to coherence at the district level – would suggest moving to a multi-year budget or similar approach. Such a move would also involve significant implementation challenges and so would also require additional investigation and time to arrive at the best policy solution. These and similar policy changes would be slated for later on in the five year plan, after the required investigation was complete.

One other aspect of this comprehensive and staged approach must be emphasized. Whatever the specifics of the policies, they must reflect a substantially altered conception of the role of the state – one that is less focused on compliance with process regulations and more reflective of a commitment that all students in the state will have the opportunity to achieve to high standards and graduate from high school prepared for college, citizenship, and work. In this role, the state sets the standards and goals (with input from stakeholders, including district practitioners), provides adequate resources and capacity-building support for reaching these goals, and holds schools and districts accountable for doing so. For their part, districts and schools would gain flexibility in determining the best allocation of resources and strategies for responding to the local context and achieving the state goals.

2. Policy responses should be based on evidence from practice and research.

With all the current rhetoric about evidence-based practices, this recommendation may seem obvious. Yet, as evident from the Getting Down to Facts studies, state policy rarely flows from evidence. Indeed, policies either accrete haphazardly over time or are put into place on a grand scale with little evidentiary base or R&D involved. We suggest a different approach, one which incorporates and supports opportunities for trying out policy directions before implementing them at full scale (see our recommendations regarding categorical programs in an accompanying brief, for example).

In addition, we believe that an important role for the state is to encourage, support, and disseminate research relevant not only to state policy options but also to strategies likely to be effective at a local level. Several research organizations in the state have been studying district practices that appear to contribute to improvements for students. Results of these studies should be disseminated broadly. In addition, districts collect their own data and conduct their own analyses and could serve as relevant case studies for improvement. We even have California districts that have been awarded the prestigious Broad prize or other awards. What lessons can others in the state learn from these successful examples of achievement and continuous improvement? Learning from the best practices of others and how they connect into a single coherent system will help all raise achievement and close the achievement gap.

Similarly, the state, including CDE and the state board, should review current policies and practices with respect to the strength of the evidence behind them. We are convinced that many of the current practices would not hold up under close scrutiny, thus opening up options for other creative solutions. The rule of thumb here should be that if a policy or practice is required, it should have a convincing basis in evidence. Without that, practices may be recommended but not mandated.

3. The state should support non-legislative as well as legislative responses.

This third aspect of our recommended approach may be more relevant for districts and for outside funders than for state policy makers. The thrust here is that much can be learned and accomplished without direct legislative action. Indeed, establishing new laws often ends up locking the state and districts into a prescribed course of action at a larger scale or for a longer time period than is beneficial. By contrast, establishing or encouraging (e.g., through the use of incentives) collaborations among districts or between K-12 systems and institutions of higher education can lead to policy or practice initiatives on a more limited scale that are more fluid and responsive to context and new knowledge. Similarly districts with the support of external support organizations can join together in collaborative endeavors. These collaborations and partnerships can have extensive influence by successfully addressing a complex problem – such as improved instruction for English learner students or more appropriate and effective programs for pre-service teacher preparations. An appropriate role for the state would include support for such initiatives and for disseminating the lessons derived from their experience.

We believe that a policy approach that addresses the findings in the Getting Down to Facts studies and reflects the above qualities would go a long way toward improving the functioning of the state system and the opportunities it affords California's youngsters. If we are to achieve what we believe should be the non negotiable goals of preparing all our graduates for success in higher education and/or a career with significant economic growth potential, closing the achievement gap while raising the overall level of achievement, and increasing the academic proficiency of English Language Learners, then a more coherent and aligned approach is necessary along with a very different view of the state's role in educational decision making and administration.

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