

A California Education Policy Convening: Getting from Facts to Policy

October 19, 2007

Synthesis of Policy Recommendations *Prepared by Mary Perry, EdSource and Scott Joftus, Cross & Joftus, LLC*

On October 19, 2007, EdSource hosted an all-day meeting in Sacramento, California to discuss various recommendations to systematically change California education policy.

Prior to the meeting, EdSource invited individuals and organizations from across the state to submit policy briefs that outlined their ideas for improving the California education system. EdSource received 47 separate policy briefs that they packaged into a Convening book, made available to all meeting attendees, all state legislators, and dozens of other state government officials.

EdSource was assisted in the planning and execution of this Convening by Cross and Joftus, LLC.

At the convening, Mary Perry and Scott Joftus presented the following summary and synthesis of the proposals. Quotations in the synthesis below are illustrative only and pulled as examples from submitted briefs.

Introduction

- A total of 42 organizations and individuals submitted 47 policy briefs altogether.
- They covered a wide range of topics related more or less directly to the larger themes of data, personnel, finance, and governance.
- Although the purpose of this synthesis was not to identify areas of consensus at this time, doing so would have been difficult anyway because:
 - All briefs had a different focus or emphasis.
 - Some briefs were tightly focused on specific recommendations, sometimes related to individual programs; other briefs put forward general policy goals or principles; and still other briefs offered no recommendations at all.
 - With rare exceptions, the reforms did not mention any reforms to which the authors were opposed.
- Nonetheless, several themes that may offer guidance to policymakers did emerge.

General Principles

Some authors presented overarching principles they hoped the state would consider as it contemplates potential changes in education policy in California. Principles—and illustrative quotations from relevant policy briefs—included:

- High expectations for all students
 - “Students must leave our K-12 system with the academic skills to be ready for college and ready for work.”
- Avoid piecemeal approaches
 - “The reform of state policy should reflect a comprehensive, coherent, and long term vision...”
 - “Policy responses should be based on evidence from practice and research.”
- Schools should be acknowledged for their successes but also held accountable
 - “Attention should be focused on improvement and giving a voice to those who are raising academic achievement and closing achievement gaps.”
 - “We must have an aggressive intervention program ... At the same time, we must reward performance.”

About the Students

- The challenges of California’s achievement gap and strategies for addressing those challenges were explicitly raised by several authors.
- One put special emphasis on reforms that would help schools serve English learners better, two briefs highlighted preschool specifically, and five focused on questions of high school reform, such as funding, curriculum, and our most vulnerable youth.
 - “Disadvantaged students... are more likely to drop out of school, less likely to take college preparatory courses, and less likely to enter college...”
 - “Boosting the academic achievement of English learners deserves immediate attention.”
 - “Our education system should support high quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten programs that articulate with K-12 classrooms ... to help close the achievement gap.”

Data

- Eighteen of the briefs addressed the issue of California’s data system in some fashion.
- Many mentioned that the state needs robust and comprehensive educational data in order to make sure that the public school system can continuously improve. They argued that data makes that possible both when it is used for accountability purposes and when it is used to evaluate practices, programs, and policies.
- A number of authors focused their presentations specifically on the data systems and their recommendations fell into two general categories:
 - First, some briefs highlighted changes related to the state data system writ large and the need to direct resources to the development of a comprehensive, integrated, longitudinal system that serves policymakers, researchers, and the public.
 - “The state’s first and highest education priority [should] be to invest in an integrated and comprehensive data system at both the local and state levels.”
 - “The state’s data system must be comprehensive enough to improve teaching and learning in the classroom, as well as local and state policy and resource allocations.”
 - A second theme related to data was the call for investments in local districts’ capacity to report data accurately, access data, and use data to both inform and evaluate their practice – in short, to create a system of continuous improvement.
 - “Ensure that data on individual teachers and students can be linked to identify what teaching practices are working and to target support to students and teachers.”
 - “Build on the work of CSIS to help districts understand and use the emerging state data tools...”
 - “Invest in capacity-building to support data collection, analysis, and informed decision-making at all levels.”

Personnel and Leadership

- Many people characterize education as fundamentally a people business and 15 of the policy briefs reflected that by focusing on various aspects of personnel and leadership:
 - Teacher Compensation
 - Credentialing
 - Working Conditions
 - Capacity Building for Educators
- All but three of those stressed the importance and need for more and better professional development or capacity building for California's educators.
 - "Strengthen the capacity of school districts to launch and sustain effective reform in their underperforming schools."
 - "California's efforts to raise student achievement and reduce the achievement gap require additional investments in training and support for ... teachers, as well as leadership development for administrators."
- Some focused on school district administrators, some on school principals, and some on teachers. Many expressed support for expanding existing efforts, including four that mentioned BTSA, the state's teacher induction program.
 - "Ensure that all principals ... have the knowledge and skills to make their schools places where all teachers want to work and students can learn."
 - "Districts should develop rigorous, standards-based systems of professional evaluation for teachers and administrators."
 - "Fully-fund professional development that spans the spectrum of a teacher's career."
- A total of nine briefs specifically raised issues related to teacher compensation, including six briefs that addressed incentives for hard-to-staff schools and positions and five briefs identifying the need for compensation reform (although there was significant variety in how the concept was framed).
 - "Implement incentives to attract and retain teachers in ... high-need areas, including rural districts, hard-to-staff schools, and identified subject areas."
 - "Districts and local bargaining units, working together, can develop innovative ways to align educators' pay with shared goals for student learning and teacher excellence."
 - "Rewarding performance must include increased pay for teachers based upon their ... ability to increase the number of students reaching grade-level proficiency and beyond."

- Working conditions were a focus in eight of the briefs. Under that heading, authors mentioned facility conditions, staffing levels, and instructional materials. They addressed both the needs of teachers and school principals.
 - “Schools with high concentrations of students in poverty and English learners need to ... ensure an environment that can attract the best teachers and provide a rich educational experience.”
 - “A restructuring of the current working conditions of administrators, especially school principals, to direct their daily focus and routines toward the improvement of teaching, learning, and curriculum development is essential.”
- Issues related to pre-service education and credentialing included a few very specific proposals to restructure the state’s approach to teaching credentials.
 - “Engage in a comprehensive study ... of the current credentialing system ... to allow for three major credentials: K-3, 4-8, and subject matter specialty thereafter.”
 - “Design and adopt a single subject specialist certification for ELD/ESL teachers in grades 7-12.”
 - “Focus on evaluating the skills that [teaching] candidates need to apply content knowledge to teach students with varying needs.”

Finance and Governance

- Of the 47 briefs submitted, 28 addressed some aspect of school finance. Because questions of funding levels and allocations permeate every part of the education system, and because California’s system is so complex, it’s helpful to provide a frame for thinking about the many issues raised in these briefs.
 - Decisions about how much to spend on K-12 education—and how to spend it—are made along a continuum from the state to school districts to schools.
 - Within the framework of state laws and the constitution, and in compliance with federal laws as well, state policymakers largely determine how much money is available, and how those funds will be allocated to school districts.
 - Within legal and regulatory constraints, and based on collective bargaining agreements, school districts decide how to spend the funds and allocate resources to the schools they govern.

- The briefs surfaced four general issues related to this system:
 - How to allocate resources fairly to districts, schools, and ultimately to students.
 - How to allocate funds efficiently so they produce the highest level of student achievement possible.
 - How to make the system simple and clear enough so those allocation decisions are transparent and it is possible to measure and report how fair and efficient they are.
 - And finally, how much is needed.

- Many authors defined fairness the same way, as providing resources based first on the needs of students. Their briefs present the concept of more funding for higher need students, typically based on students' family backgrounds and disabilities, but the question of grade-specific differences in needs was also raised. A subset also argued that districts should receive funding based also on variations in the costs they face because of their location or circumstance. Three briefs specifically targeted transportation costs.
 - “Revenue allocations should be guided by student needs ... [and] should be adjusted for regional cost differences.”
 - “New resources should be targeted to those students with lower levels of educational attainment, including those from low-income families.”
 - “Before the state changes the school finance system, [it] needs to equitably fund school transportation costs.”

- The goal of transparency was also raised often. While many talked about it in general terms, six organizations that presented ideas for specific reforms recommended dismantling the majority of the state's current categorical programs in favor of some type of “weighted student formula” approach. One recommended a full choice model in which schools would compete for students and thus for funding.
 - “The system as a whole should be simple, transparent, and easily understood.”
 - “The charter school funding system ... should be extended to govern virtually all funds ... on a per-student block grant basis and base any variance in funding solely on student need.”
 - “We strongly urge the state to investigate the use of a weighted student formula targeted to the district (that considers particular district circumstances such as degree of poverty and geography).”
 - “If California truly wants to reform education in 2008, it should focus on empowering parents as education consumers who can choose from a variety of education options for their children.”

- The question of how to allocate funds efficiently, so that each dollar contributes in as productive a way as possible to student achievement, was the area where the recommendations seemed to diverge the most. This is the place where finance and governance issues converge.
- Ten briefs emphasized enhanced local flexibility. Others recommended specific programs in which they want the state to invest or stressed the need for the state to put constraints on local school district allocation decisions to make sure funds are used wisely.
 - “As long as there is agreement about expectations, then flexibility should and must be provided.”
 - “Care must be taken as we progress toward simplification (of the school finance system) so that essential rights and needs of all students are protected.”
 - “We should increase the funding level for categorical programs that we know are working.”
- It may be small comfort to Californians, but national experts see as a new and daunting goal the development of a school finance system that is highly productive in terms of student achievement.
 - “The fundamental problem in education finance today is that the time has come to fund student success and we don’t know how to accomplish it.

“ ... funding student success depends on our ability to redesign the system so that its goals, funds, operations, and accountability work together to support high levels of student performance.”
- On the question of whether schools in California have enough funding, 20 policy briefs explicitly called for an increase in school funding. Some called for increased funding for specific areas or programs, while others argued that the state could not reach its academic goals without investing more in the system as a whole.
 - “More resources are needed for virtually every aspect of education, from materials, textbooks, and supplies to technology, libraries and facilities; plus expanded and enhanced human resources.”
 - “Provide access to effective preschool for all children, starting with those who need it most.”
 - “The level of resources should factor in the costs of staffing necessary for professional development and collaboration time, teacher mentoring, small class sizes, manageable workloads, and materials and activities specific to school focus and vision.”
 - “Significantly greater resources and flexibility are imperative for high schools ... to help students achieve at greater levels than ever before.”

- Missing from any of the briefs was a specific policy recommendation for where the funds for a sizable new investment in K-12 education would come from. That said, one author discussed taxing principles that could help guide a discussion of revenue options. Two briefs proposed finance reforms based on projections of increased per-pupil funding under the provisions of Proposition 98. And one provided a simulation for implementing a new finance approach without reducing any district's current allocation.

Conclusion

- Many Californians care about improving the quality of our public schools in order to create a brighter future for ourselves, our children, and our state. Those who gathered at this convening did not lack for ideas about ways the state could:
 - Build a data system to inform continuous improvement
 - Invest more wisely in the skilled educators who do this important work
 - Change our finance and governance systems to better support student success.
- The day ended with many questions related to whether these ideas can and will be implemented:
 - What opportunities exist?
 - What are the obstacles to change?
 - How strong is the political will?
 - Will 2008 be the “Year of Education” in that it marks the start of a long, serious, and on-going effort to achieve these goals for the children of California?