

Interest-Group Mapping and Education Reform: The Case for a Comprehensive, Consensus-Focused Proposal

The School Finance Exploration Partnership : California School Boards Association, Children Now, the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund and the California State Parent Teachers Association

Topics Covered: Finance, Governance, Personnel, Data and Transparency
Primary Partnership Contact: Lisa Burlison

The members of the School Finance Exploration Partnership would like to thank the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for their generous support of the project.

The School Finance Exploration Partnership

During 2005-06, the School Finance Exploration Partnership conducted nearly 70 interviews with key opinion and political leaders in California on school finance reform through a generous grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The interviewees included major statewide and regional business organizations, prominent business leaders, major statewide ethnic, faith based and community based organizations, leading policymakers and opinion leaders, and key education leaders.

The interests and perspectives represented by these interviewees are likely to have great influence over the success or failure of any significant school finance reform effort. Either because of their own personal political influence or through their representation of powerful advocacy organizations, these 70 interviewees will play a key role in determining the outcome of any comprehensive package of finance and policy reforms in public education.

The goal of these interviews was to begin identifying common ground for the development of a comprehensive package of both reform and investment relative to California's public school system. While much work remains to be done to develop and implement such a package, it is clear based on these initial interviews that there is the potential for a diverse coalition of California leaders to come together and promote a comprehensive solution that is politically viable and will have a positive impact on our state's students.

The Need for Comprehensive Stakeholder-Driven Reform

In order for any comprehensive education reform to successfully be passed either by the legislature or the voters, key interests must be in agreement and supportive of the proposed reform.

Too often, the statewide education policy debate is highly polarized between two camps: one advocating only for increased resources, the other advocating only for more efficiency. The reality is that the only pathway for substantive reform lies in the ability of the major constituencies on both sides of this debate to find consensus and commit to moving the education reform agenda forward. Identifying the general areas where interests coincide and consensus may be found is therefore critical. An analysis of the interviews conducted thus far indicates that these divisions are not insurmountable, and there is actually greater agreement than many initially believed. This process also underscores the fact that it will be critical for a comprehensive package to be developed in order to ensure that every child is well served by our education system.

Reform Options and Recommendations – the Beginning of a Comprehensive Map

Constituency groups and policymakers were divided about how to proceed on public education policy and the political rhetoric made it appear as though there would be little opportunity for them to come together. Interestingly though, as each interview was conducted, several themes emerged. It became clear that while there is vast diversity in terms of political ideology and knowledge of the nuances in the K-12 system, there are a set of core values that are consistent among California's political and opinion leaders – responsibility, openness, stability & flexibility, adequacy and equity

Eight major reform ideas generated the most support among interviewees. These ideas can be loosely categorized into the broad areas of: 1) recruitment, retention and equitable distribution of staff; 2) school finance and governance reform; 3) transparency and data; 4) choice; and 5) revenue options.

To the extent possible, information is provided on how interviewees talked about these reforms, why they believe they have promise and what concerns were raised. It is important to note that while the interviews followed a common protocol, the discussions were dynamic and interviewees did not necessarily address every policy area. Therefore, in the following discussion, the number of positive or negative responses to specific policy proposals are based only on the subset of interviewees that directly addressed each issue.

Recruitment, Retention and Equitable Distribution of Staff

Having well-trained, experienced staff equitably distributed throughout the public school system was highly valued by most interviewees. In fact, it was the most commonly cited priority during the interview process.

Interviewees identified various strategies to attract, retain and ensure the appropriate distribution of staff, especially teachers, with a primary focus on compensation reforms and improvements to working conditions. A great majority of respondents were supportive of compensation reform, several were willing to consider it and only one was opposed to reform in this area. Improving working conditions, especially in hard-to-staff schools, garnered the support of many respondents, with no opposition.

Interestingly, the balance between compensation reform and working conditions varied among interviewees, with most focusing almost exclusively on compensation reform; some saying the most leverage should be applied to improve working conditions; and a significant proportion believing that a combination of approaches is the preferable option.

While there were varying degrees of interest and support for the specific reform ideas outlined below, most interviewees were open to exploring these strategies further, especially if a comprehensive package included well-developed reform proposals and additional resources.

I. Staff Compensation Reform

While several of the interviewees discussed the desire to increase teacher compensation overall, the vast majority of respondents explored three specific compensation reform concepts – performance pay, differential pay and incentive pay.

Performance pay was the most highly charged compensation reform strategy, with strong advocates for and against this approach. By and large, the business community was the most interested in pursuing this model. Proponents discussed the need to reward outstanding teachers and to identify teachers that may be struggling. Many of these same business leaders, as well as educators, researchers, and civil rights groups raised concerns about how to create a fair and accurate system. Some educators discussed the possibility of piloting this approach if: 1) there were additional resources to do so; 2) there were multiple performance measures employed; and 3) the policy was locally negotiated.

Numerous interviewees advocated for, or were open to, the idea of implementing differential pay in order to attract teachers with credentials in math, science, special education and English Language Learners (EL). A few respondents were opposed. For math and science teachers, the prevailing discussion centered around the need to compete for staff given existing market demands. Special education and EL teachers were also mentioned because of the increased work load (e.g. IEPs), the need for specialized training and the current shortages. Some interviewees were concerned, however, that paying teachers different amounts based on subject area could create animosity at the school site and promote an unhealthy school culture.

Incentive pay to attract teachers to the hardest to staff schools was the most supported concept of the compensation reform strategies. Interviewees from business, education organizations, civil rights groups, community organizations and researchers talked about the need for greater equity in the distribution of teachers, and many saw this strategy as a promising approach. Some researchers and educators commented though, that the incentive may need to be substantial to actually draw teachers to hard-to-staff schools. On the other hand though, other interviewees also questioned whether using salary incentives would create the right motivation for teachers to work in these schools.

II. Working Conditions

Making schools inviting places to work and learn was a goal expressed by virtually every interviewee. Respondents often used the term “working conditions” as short hand for ensuring that school facilities are well equipped, inviting and the school grounds are safe); there is a collegial, collaborative working relationship among teachers; and the principal is a knowledgeable, respected instructional leader. Some interviewees also discussed the need for smaller classes, and collaboration and preparation time for teachers.

While ideally all schools would be a desirable place to work and learn, many interviewees believed that the state should begin by targeting school investments in hard-to-staff schools in order to support students and

to attract and retain skilled and knowledgeable teachers, administrators, and certificated staff (i.e. counselors, nurses). Some interviewees also discussed the importance of giving schools and districts the flexibility to determine the right combination of working condition improvements in order to meet the needs of their unique students and communities.

School Finance and Governance Reform

Fiscal and governance reform were closely linked in the interview conversations due to the fact that much of the debate is not only about how the money gets allocated, but who makes funding decisions. Reforms in this area were often identified as a priority for interviewees. In fact, all of the interviewees believed that California's public school finance system is too convoluted and impossible to explain to the public. In addition, most had concerns that the decision-making process is not clear, nor is it necessarily oriented to ensure student success.

III. A Weighted Student Formula

The concept of a weighted student formula was viewed favorably by interviewees. Of the interviewees that commented on this reform, a large proportion were supportive and several thought the idea had merit but wanted to consider it more (none were opposed). A weighted student formula made conceptual sense to interviewees because it was seen as being a more rational approach than our current school funding system. In addition, interviewees talked about it in terms of equity (certain students getting more, certain high cost regions getting more), transparency (it is easier to explain to the public), as well as stability and flexibility (districts will know what they will receive and have the ability to spend it to meet local needs).

There was a difference in opinion among interviewees, however, about whether the weighted student formula should solely be an allocation model from the state to school districts or if funding should flow all the way to school sites. Several of interviewees believed that school sites should have greater control over resources, a handful were open to the idea and a couple were opposed. This governance question focused mainly on whether school sites, namely the principal, should be making more, or all, of the funding decisions. Much of this debate centers on questions of capacity, the role of the school district and how to ensure both flexibility and quality decision making.

A handful of interviewees also raised concerns about how the state was going to ensure that the money is spent on high needs students (that the additional "weights" would reach them). For some, this conflict was resolved by the existence of the state's academic accountability system. Others had specific concerns with the current accountability measurements and mechanisms in place and/or believed that existing categorical programs serve an important function.

A few interviewees also discussed the potential difficulty in determining the weights for each student subgroup. Their concerns ranged from the inability to ground the weights with solid research and the yearly political negotiating over the weights, to the possibility of encouraging a culture of victimization. Even with these concerns, most interviewees believed the promise of a weighted student formula outweighed the potential implementation difficulties.

IV. Local Revenue Authority

Granting school boards the ability to raise revenue locally was seen by many interviewees, especially in the business and education community, as a useful way of activating community members that have become disengaged in their local schools since the passage of Proposition 13. Interviewees discussed the importance of a local connection between generating revenue and decision making and felt that it could help ensure that the public was paying closer attention and would hold school boards accountable for how funds are allocated. In addition, many respondents believed that the provision of local revenue authority would be an opportunity to augment the amount of resources available to students and make certain community priorities were met.

A significant number of the interviewees supported this model and a handful were open to the idea. A few respondents were opposed. Even among supporters however, there were concerns about the potential to

create inequity in the system. Respondents believed that if the state played a role in providing adequate funding and implemented a mechanism for ensuring equity (so that there was not too much disparity between districts' funding levels), this would be a reform worth pursuing.

Researchers on teacher recruitment and retention also cautioned that it was especially important to ensure equitable funding within a region. Teachers tend to seek employment within a set regional market, so if hard-to-staff schools do not have equal levels of funding (or more funding) to attract teachers within a region, the result could be a maldistribution of less experienced teachers in these schools.

Transparency and Data

Of interviewees that participated in this outreach process, nearly two thirds wanted better, more user-friendly academic and fiscal data. Most believed this information would help inform and engage the public, ensure accountability, and could lead to better state, local and site-based decision making. While none of the participants believed that creating better data systems would be the linchpin in a comprehensive package, over half mentioned that it is an important element and believe it is well overdue.

V. Linked Data Systems

California currently offers publicly available academic and fiscal data. However, many interviewees commented that the data is often difficult to understand, is not longitudinal, and is isolated in separate systems. At a minimum, many interviewees would like to see the creation of a student identifier system to track student achievement scores over time. In addition, some respondents wanted better site based financial data, such as actual teacher salaries (instead of averages), curriculum offerings and an idea of other locally-available resources.

Several interviewees also advocated for or were open to the establishment of a teacher identifier in order to track the movement and qualifications of teachers. In addition, this identifier could be used to link teacher data with student data. By and large, most respondents were interested in a teacher identifier for research purposes and to target professional development opportunities. Some however, also saw it as a necessary component in order to implement performance pay.

While each of these data options could independently enhance transparency in the system, many interviewees saw value in linking them for research purposes and to help inform decision-making.

VI. User-Friendly Educator and Public Formats

In addition to creating and maintaining improved data systems, respondents wanted to make sure the information could be used by educators (to inform practice and policy) and by the public (to access information, advocate for changes and hold the system accountable) alike.

Choice

While only a couple of interviewees mentioned that expanding access to choice in the public school system should be part of a comprehensive reform and investment package, the support for charter schools was significant enough to warrant its inclusion in this portion of the analysis.

VII. Charter Schools

Many interviewees were supportive of charter schools. A handful of key leaders were strong proponents of these programs generally and advocated expanding access to charters by raising the statewide cap or allowing for multiple authorizers. They talked about the competitive pressure charters put on the system and how they allowed for greater innovation.

By and large, interviewees were moderately supportive of charters because of the belief that they provided more choice and flexibility for parents. Even among supporters though, many felt that charter schools should be unnecessary because, ideally, neighborhood schools would be the community's first choice.

Revenue Options

Most of the interviewees (including representatives from every constituency subgroup that participated in this process) said they would be willing to consider, and potentially advocate for, an increased investment in K-12 public education if it were coupled with structural reforms.

Many of the interviewees were uncomfortable identifying a particular tax or set of taxes in order to raise revenue. Instead, participants tended to discuss taxing principles. The two most prominent principles were that the tax should be progressive in nature and a collective investment. In addition, numerous interviewees suggested that polling should be used to help determine the specific tax, and that sound tax policy should be employed in order to ensure that there are minimal impacts to any one specific sector of the state's economy.

VIII. Proposition 13

Approximately one-third of the interviewees thought that Proposition 13 should be revisited in some way, but very few thought it was a politically viable option. On the other hand, nine interviewees were open to the idea of rethinking Proposition 13 and only one interviewee expressed opposition. While many discussed the inequalities the policy has created for new homeowners and businesses, most believed the public would be reluctant to trade the stability Proposition 13 provides.

A few organizations with access to polling information indicated that property taxes are not necessarily the third rail of the electorate. It may just be that taxes in general are viewed with suspicion.

IX. Other

Below is a list of some of the other revenue options that were identified by interviewees:

- Some interviewees were supportive of lowering the threshold on local parcel taxes to 55%.
- An increase in the income tax garnered a similar number of supportive responses, with a few maybe and opposed responses.
- The establishment of a statewide parcel tax was attractive to the majority of interviewees, the remaining responses split equally between those opposed and open to the idea.
- Some interviewees were supportive of an increase in the sales tax, with a small amount expressing that they were willing to consider the idea, or were opposed.
- A tax on services was supported by several interviewees, one interviewee was opposed, and one was open to the idea.