

COMMENTARY

The PACE Perspective on 'The California Way'

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This is one of the most exciting, daunting and critically important moments in California's education policy history. We are all in uncharted territory.

Policymakers and educators at all levels of the system are wrestling with the virtually simultaneous implementation of four radically new and promising policy initiatives: the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); computer adaptive assessments developed by the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium; the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF); and a new accountability system that focuses on Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and an evaluation rubric rather than the traditional Academic Performance Index (API) scores. The implementation of these major reforms has redefined the roles and responsibilities of virtually every education actor—from state policymakers to county superintendents to local school boards, teacher, and parents.

States across the country are watching to see whether California will succeed in implementing these reforms and how they can replicate parts of what state superintendent Tom Torlakson calls "the California Way." As the sole organization in California that focuses on connecting education scholars and policymakers, [Policy Analysis for California Education](#) (PACE) has a vital and unique role to play in monitoring and informing these transformational reform efforts. For more than 33 years, PACE has played a critical role in California's education policy debates, providing hard evidence on policy impact and rigorous analysis of policy alternatives. We may not have all the answers now, but we know that research and evidence-based practices are essential elements in a strategy to promote continuous improvement in California's education system.

With policy innovation come new opportunities for inquiry and learning as well as new responsibilities to ensure that the reforms benefit students. We are thankful to [Charles Taylor Kerchner](#), longtime PACE contributor and senior research fellow and professor emeritus at Claremont Graduate University, for inviting us to contribute to the [Education Week Blog 'On California.'](#) This post is our introduction to *Education Week* readers.

Our posts will focus on presenting readers with timely findings from the PACE research network on key policy issues at all levels of California's fragmented education system. You can also expect the latest research from the [CORE-PACE Partnership](#), which is committed to innovating, implementing, and scaling new strategies and tools to help students succeed.

One recent example of our work is our recent [CORE-PACE report](#) on the impact of student subgroup sizes in an accountability system. The passage of the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) requires states, including California, to determine the number or n-size threshold for reporting subgroup results in school-level data reports. Setting the n-size too high means that subgroups "disappear" in many schools, because there are too few students in any one subgroup. When subgroups "disappear," of course, achievement gaps are impossible to see—and hard to eliminate.

Under NCLB California set the n-size threshold at 100, meaning that schools with fewer than 100 students in a group, such as

African-Americans, would not have to report their results. The CORE-PACE partnership released a report in May that analyzed the trade-offs between setting an n-size of 100 and an alternative n-size of 20, as well as examining the trade-offs present for n-sizes within that range. The PACE policy memo "[Making Students Visible](#)" revealed that setting the n-size for school-level reporting at 20 greatly increases the number of schools that report results for specific student subgroups, particularly students with disabilities and African American students.

This PACE report has already played a key role in setting standards for states. The U.S. Department of Education just released a rule notice proposing changes to [ESSA regulation § 200.17](#). The proposed change requires states to "establish a range of n-sizes, not to exceed 30..." In response, we released an [addendum](#) to this report comparing subgroup sizes of 20 versus 30. The State Board of Education will make a decision about the n-size that California will require at a board meeting this fall.

The stakes are high for California. The radical changes that have transformed the state's education policy system require that we all work together to help every student succeed. In this rapidly changing landscape policy innovation, rigorous analysis, and the scaling and diffusion of evidence-based practices must become familiar features of the California way. The future of 6.2 million California students depends on it, and PACE is committed to doing our part to get it right.

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